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WARRIORS

TIGERCLAW'S FURY

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ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS
TIGERCLAW'S FURY

ERIN HUNTER

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ALLEGIANCES

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER	**BLUESTAR**—blue-gray she-cat, tinged with silver around her muzzle
DEPUTY	**FIREHEART**—handsome ginger tom **APPRENTICE, CLOUDPAW**
MEDICINE CAT	**YELLOWFANG**—old dark gray she-cat with a broad, flattened face, formerly of ShadowClan **APPRENTICE, CINDERPELT**
WARRIORS	(toms, and she-cats without kits) **WHITESTORM**—big white tom **APPRENTICE, BRIGHTPAW** **DARKSTRIPE**—sleek black-and-gray tabby tom **APPRENTICE, FERNPAW** **LONGTAIL**—pale tabby tom with dark black stripes **APPRENTICE, SWIFTPAW** **RUNNINGWIND**—swift tabby tom **MOUSEFUR**—small dusky-brown she-cat **APPRENTICE, THORNPAW**

BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, ASHPAW

SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat

APPRENTICES

(more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

SWIFTPAW—black-and-white tom

CLOUDPAW—long-haired white tom

BRIGHTPAW—she-cat, white with ginger splotches

THORNPAW—golden-brown tabby tom

FERNPAW—pale gray with darker flecks, she-cat, pale green eyes

ASHPAW—pale gray with darker flecks, tom, dark blue eyes

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

FROSTFUR—beautiful white coat and blue eyes

BRINDLEFACE—pretty tabby

GOLDENFLOWER—pale ginger coat

SPECKLETAIL—pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

WILLOWPELT—very pale gray she-cat with unusual blue eyes

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

HALFTAIL—big dark brown tabby tom with part of his tail missing

SMALLEAR—gray tom with very small ears; the oldest tom in ThunderClan

PATCHPELT—small black-and-white tom

ONE-EYE—pale gray she-cat, the oldest cat in ThunderClan; virtually blind and deaf

DAPPLETAIL—once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat with a lovely dappled coat

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER	**NIGHTSTAR**—old black tom
DEPUTY	**CINDERFUR**—thin gray tom
MEDICINE CAT	**RUNNINGNOSE**—small gray-and-white tom
WARRIORS	**APPLEFUR**—mottled brown she-cat
	BOULDER—silver tabby tom
	FERNSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat
	FLINTFANG—older gray tom
	RATSCAR—scarred dark brown tom
	ROWANBERRY—brown-and-cream she-cat
	RUSSETFUR—dark ginger she-cat
	WETFOOT—gray tabby tom
	APPRENTICE, OAKPAW
	LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom
	WHITETHROAT—black tom with white chest and paws
QUEENS	**DAWNCLOUD**—small tabby

	DARKFLOWER—black she-cat
	TALLPOPPY—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

WINDCLAN

LEADER	**TALLSTAR**—black-and-white tom with a very long tail
DEPUTY	**DEADFOOT**—black tom with a twisted paw
MEDICINE CAT	**BARKFACE**—short-tailed brown tom
WARRIORS	**MUDCLAW**—mottled dark brown tom
	APPRENTICE, WEBPAW
	TORNEAR—tabby tom
	APPRENTICE, TAWNYPAW
	ONEWHISKER—brown tabby tom
	APPRENTICE, WHITEPAW
	RUNNINGBROOK—light gray tabby she-cat
QUEENS	**ASHFOOT**—gray queen
	MORNINGFLOWER—tortoiseshell queen

RIVERCLAN

LEADER	**CROOKEDSTAR**—huge light-colored tabby with a twisted jaw
DEPUTY	**LEOPARDFUR**—unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat
MEDICINE CAT	**MUDFUR**—long-haired light brown tom
WARRIORS	**BLACKCLAW**—smoky black tom
	APPRENTICE, HEAVYPAW
	STONEFUR—gray tom with battle-scarred

ears

APPRENTICE, SHADEPAW

LOUDBELLY—dark brown tom

GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom, formerly of ThunderClan

QUEENS

MISTYFOOT—dark gray she-cat

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat

ELDERS

GRAYPOOL—thin gray she-cat with patchy fur and a scarred muzzle

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

BARLEY—black-and-white tom who lives on a farm close to the forest

BLACKFOOT—large white tom with huge jet-black paws, formerly ShadowClan deputy

CLAWFACE—scrawny brown tom

MOWGLI—brown tom with green eyes

PRINCESS—light brown tabby with a distinctive white chest and paws; a kittypet

RAVENPAW—sleek black cat who lives on the farm with Barley

SMUDGE—plump, friendly black-and-white kitten who lives in a house at the edge of the forest; a kittypet

SNAG—huge tabby tom

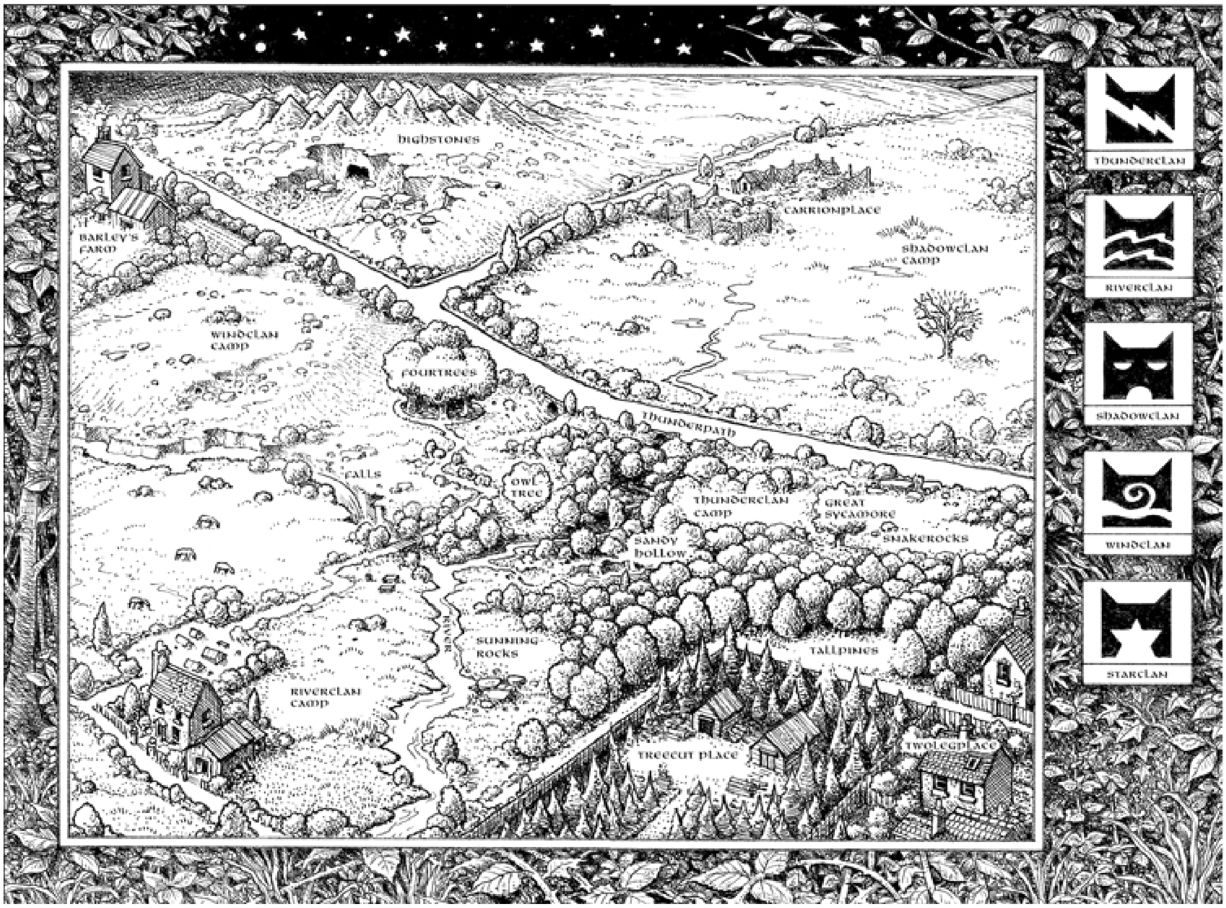
STUMPYTAIL—brown tabby tom

TANGLEBURR—gray-and-brown she-cat,

formerly of ShadowClan

TIGERCLAW—big dark brown tabby tom with unusually long front claws, formerly of ThunderClan

Maps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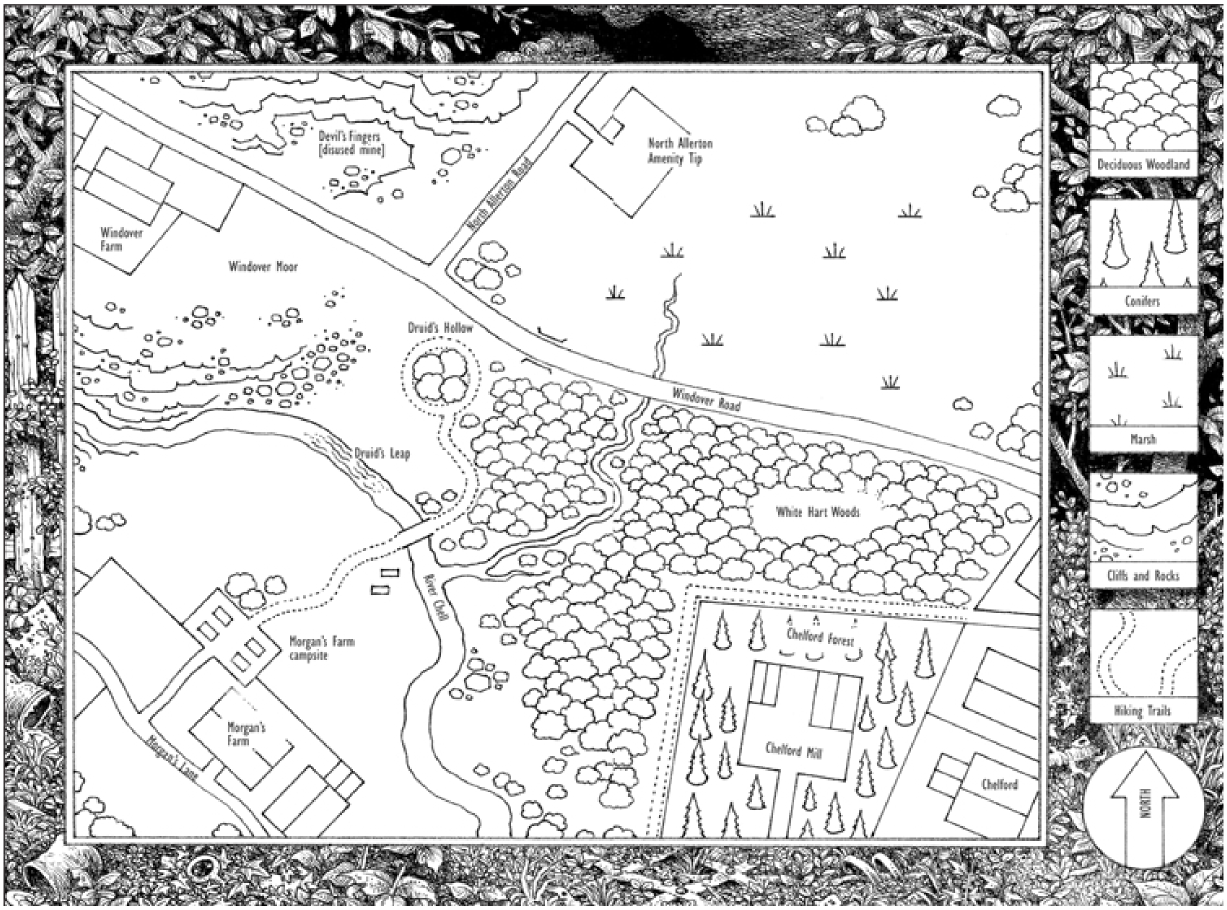
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Morgan's Farm
Morgan's Lane
Chelford Forest
Chelford Mill
Chelford
Deciduous Woodland
Conifers
Marsh
Cliffs and Rocks
Hiking Trails
NORTH

Chapter 1

“Kill him!”

“Blind him!”

“Drive him out of the forest!”

The wound in Tigerclaw’s belly pulsed with agony, and he felt warm, sticky blood pooling beneath his paws. His Clanmates’ furious words seemed to be coming from a long way off, as if he were underwater, cocooned in peaceful cold. *You lost!* screeched a voice inside his head. *Beaten by kittypets and fools!* Tigerclaw felt his lip curl up in a snarl. *I lost this battle,* he conceded silently. *But for as long as there is blood in my veins, I will not give up.*

“Tigerclaw,” Bluestar meowed, “have you anything to say in your defense?” The ThunderClan leader’s blue-gray fur was streaked with blood—Tigerclaw’s as well as her own—and her eyes were dull and unfocused. Tigerclaw felt a thrill of satisfaction that his actions, his careful plans, had left her shattered and flailing inside. He knew a broken cat when he saw one; this was the end of Bluestar’s leadership, even if he hadn’t managed to take her last lives. The thought numbed the pain in his belly and gave strength to his trembling legs.

“Defend myself to *you*, you gutless excuse for a warrior?” he hissed. “What sort of a leader are you? Keeping the peace with other Clans. *Helping* them! You barely punished Fireheart and Graystripe for feeding RiverClan, and you sent them to fetch WindClan home! I would have never shown such kittypet softness. I would have brought back the days of TigerClan. I would have made ThunderClan great!”

“And how many cats would have died for it?” Bluestar replied softly. She shook herself, then lifted her head. “If you have nothing else to say, then I sentence you to exile,” she declared. “You will leave ThunderClan territory now, and if any cat sees you here after sunrise tomorrow, they have my permission to kill you.”

“Kill me?” Tigerclaw echoed. “I’d like to see any of them try.”

“Fireheart beat you!” Graystripe yowled.

“Fireheart.” Tigerclaw slowly turned his head to look at the ginger kittypet. *A warrior name will never make you forestborn, no matter what your Clanmates tell you!* “Cross my path again, you stinking furball, and we’ll see who’s the stronger.”

Fireheart sprang up, tail lashing, even though one of his eyes was swollen shut from a blow from Tigerclaw’s paw. “Any time, Tigerclaw,” he spat.

“No!” Bluestar interrupted them. “No more fighting. Tigerclaw, leave my sight.”

Tigerclaw made himself stand up, in spite of the trembling that shook his paws. A fresh wave of blood oozed from his belly as the edges of the wound shifted. He heard gasps from the cats around him but ignored them. *Pain is nothing! Defeat is nothing!*

“Don’t think I’m finished,” he warned, staring at the battle-stunned faces around him. “I’ll be a leader yet. And any cat who comes with me will be well looked after.” He looked for his closest ally in ThunderClan, the cat who’d always told him that he should have been leader by now. “Darkstripe?”

The black-striped tabby stayed where he was, sitting among the warriors. “I trusted you, Tigerclaw,” he whimpered. “I thought you were the finest warrior in the forest. But you plotted with that . . . that *tyrant*.” Tigerclaw guessed he was speaking of Brokentail, the exiled ShadowClan leader who now lived in ThunderClan’s camp. “And you said nothing. And now you expect me to come with you?” He dropped his head, unable to meet Tigerclaw’s gaze.

Traitor! You dare to deny me in front of all these cats? You'll pay for this with every hair on your pelt!

Tigerclaw forced his fur to stay flat. "I needed Brokentail's help to make contact with the rogue cats. If you choose to take this personally, that's your problem," he sniffed. He looked at another cat who'd listened to his plans, promised to stand by him when he brought clear, strong leadership to their Clan. "Longtail?"

The pale tabby almost leaped out of his skin. "Come with you, Tigerclaw? Into exile?" He sounded horrified. "I—no, I can't. I'm loyal to ThunderClan!"

You're a pathetic coward, more like! Tigerclaw screeched silently. He scanned the ranks of cats, looking for a hint of understanding, a recognition that this weak and kittypet-favoring Clan was no place for a true warrior. "What about you, Dustpelt?" he growled. "You'll have richer pickings with me than you ever will in ThunderClan."

The young brown tabby got deliberately to his paws and picked his way through the surrounding cats until he stood in front of Tigerclaw. "I looked up to you," he admitted. "I wanted to be like you. But Redtail was my mentor. I owe him more than any cat. And you killed him." His eyes grew huge and he started to shake. "You killed him and betrayed the Clan. I'd rather die than follow you."

Redtail deserved to die! He was too much like Bluestar, always looking for peace and reconciliation. It was only luck that Oakheart hadn't killed him before being caught by that rockfall. Redtail would have never survived that battle.

"Tigerclaw!" Bluestar broke into his memories of dust and falling stones and the bright red slash opening up in Redtail's throat. "No more of this. Go now."

Tigerclaw lifted his head and met her gaze. "I'm going. But I'll be back; you can be sure of that. I'll be revenged on you all!" He turned and walked away, gritting his teeth against the pain in his belly. *I will not show them how badly I have been wounded!* He paused as he drew level with

Fireheart. "And as for you . . ." he growled. "Keep your eyes open, Fireheart. Keep your ears pricked. Keep looking behind you. Because one day I'll find you, and then you'll be crow-food."

"You're crow-food now," Fireheart snapped, but the stench of fear rose from him.

Tigerclaw stared into the warrior's wide green eyes. *You know already that I will kill you one day. Your last breath will be gasped beneath my paws. Your last drop of blood will be spilled on my fur. Stones will break and the sky will fall when we meet in our final battle.*

With a flick of his tail that felt as if it was ripping his belly apart, he walked across the clearing without looking back. From inside the nursery he heard the tiny mewls of his son and daughter, Bramblekit and Tawnykit, quickly hushed by their mother, Goldenflower. *I will come back for you,* Tigerclaw vowed. He would not leave his kits to be raised in this Clan of weaklings. They deserved to learn from his example, to model themselves on his courage and skill in battle. *Some skill you showed today!* came the voice in his head again. *Thistleclaw would have clouted you over the ears for letting yourself get beaten by a kittypet and a star-crazed old she-cat.*

Thistleclaw wouldn't have dared to take on the leader of his Clan! Tigerclaw lashed back. *If he hadn't let Bluestar become deputy in the first place, everything would be different. He would have chosen me to succeed him, and ThunderClan would be as strong as we deserve!*

He pushed his way through the gorse tunnel, hardly noticing the thorns that clutched at his blood-matted fur. The barricade had been ripped and scattered by fleeing cats, cats who had sworn to fight alongside Tigerclaw until he had killed Bluestar, on the promise that he would make them his foremost warriors in the new ThunderClan. Tigerclaw spat onto the dusty earth. He should have known better than to rely on those half-trained rogues. Only a forestborn cat had the true instincts of a warrior. The ShadowClan outlaws had disappointed him, too, made soft by moons of surviving alone, too easily cowed by cats fighting to defend their home. Tigerclaw needed more time with them, to remind them of the training they had received under Brokenstar. The former ShadowClan leader may have been criticized for asking too much of his warriors, but he had made his Clan the most feared and powerful in the forest. Who could judge him for that?

And Tigerclaw might still have won if RiverClan hadn't turned up at the tipping point of the battle, Mistyfoot and Leopardfur bounding in to rescue the Clan cats who had been their sworn enemies just a few moons earlier. Why did the Clans show so much mercy to one another? What did it matter to RiverClan if ThunderClan lost its leader? Tigerclaw felt his hackles rise. Of course, it was in RiverClan's interests to keep Bluestar in command, weak and addled and unable to maintain her grip on Sunningrocks. It was probably Crookedstar's greatest fear to have Tigerclaw in charge of his closest neighbors.

The dappled shadows cast by breeze-stirred oak and beech leaves gave way to cool damp gloom beneath the pine trees that bordered Twolegplace. Tigerclaw paused for a moment to check that no cat was following him, but the woods were silent apart from the call of a blackbird and a tree branch resting against another with a soft creak. He let himself sink down on a patch of moss, letting out a grunt of pain. He craned his neck to study the wound on his belly. Fireheart had been lucky to get so close to him. But if he'd really wanted to hurt Tigerclaw, he should have gone for his neck.

Tigerclaw dragged some loose moss against the wound, hissing as he pressed it hard to stem the bleeding. His head swam with pain, and he fought off a wave of blackness that rose behind his eyes. He pictured the Clan he had left behind, battle-bruised and cowering in the dust. Did he really want to command warriors that were so nearly beaten by a half-trained patrol of rogues? Fireheart had taken all the credit for winning, as always, and every cat had been hanging on his words, gazing in doe-eyed admiration. If they were so willing to listen to a kittypet, they didn't deserve a leader such as Tigerclaw. How dare Bluestar cast him out? Had she forgotten how many times he had won battles for ThunderClan, found food for his Clanmates, defended the borders against their enemies? They owed him everything! But in the end they had treated him worse than a lice-riddled fox. He could have been the best leader ThunderClan had ever known!

Better than your father, Pinestar, purred the voice in his ear. *He betrayed his Clan—betrayed* you*—when he left to become a kittypet. You would never walk away from your Clanmates if you were their leader.*

The moss under his paw started to overflow with blood. With a grunt, Tigerclaw cast it aside and looked around for another clump. There was no more soft green moss, but he spotted some dry leaf-mulch within reach. He clawed it against his belly, packing it into the cut. He felt a burst of triumph against his surroundings: The forest had tried to deny him moss, but he had found something else!

Tigerclaw half sat up, pricking his ears as he stared into the trees. As clear as stars, his path stretched out before him. There was more than one Clan in the forest. More than one chance to become a leader. His destiny must lie elsewhere. Tigerclaw would return to ThunderClan only to crush his former Clanmates in battle. He would not fail again.

CHAPTER 2

The air beneath the pine trees grew colder and the ground under Tigerclaw started to feel damp. He licked it to get some moisture, then heaved himself to his paws. He couldn’t stay here; the evening border patrol would be coming this way soon. He didn’t want to see pity in the eyes of his Clanmates if they found him wounded and exhausted, still inside ThunderClan territory. Wincing with every step, Tigerclaw limped deeper into the pine trees. He stayed away from Twolegplace, with its curious kittypets and stray dogs. Instead he headed for the wooden den behind a tall fence of pine trunks, where the Twolegs that cut down trees came in the daytime. He squeezed through the fence, leaving a smear of blood on the stripped wooden post. There was a gap the height of a rabbit below the wooden den. Tigerclaw crawled into the shadows and lay full-length on the earth. There was a faint hint of mouse from farther under the den, but Tigerclaw didn’t have the strength to pursue the scent, let alone a scampering piece of prey.

Where is the moss that lines your nest in the warriors’ den? Where are the feathers? Is this how your life will be from now on, huddled on bare dirt, starving because you’re too weak to feed yourself?

Tigerclaw’s belly rumbled, but he pressed his cheek deeper into the soil to block out the sound. Right now, sleep was more important than food. Once he had rested, once he had eaten, then he could begin the destruction of ThunderClan.

He dreamed that he was on fire, scorched by the claw marks that Fireheart had left in his skin. He thrashed with his paws, but sleep held him fast, clutching him in a semi-conscious daze. He was dimly aware of the daylight seeping in from outside, but before he could rouse himself and go out in search of food, it seemed that night was falling again, shrinking Tigerclaw's world to a blur of pain and tortured sleep. He lashed out blindly at screeches from the mist that surrounded him, felt claws rake his fur and teeth snap close to his ears. He whirled, stumbling on legs that felt heavy and sore, but there was nothing except damp gray clouds behind him. *Too slow,* hissed the voice. *Don't let Fireheart and Bluestar catch you! They'll crush you like a bug!*

"Never!" roared Tigerclaw. He woke with a start, breathless and writhing on his back. His belly burned like fire and his claws were unsheathed, clogged with dirt. He crawled out from beneath the wooden den into a cool, pale dawn. How many days had he lain here? One? Two? More? His vision blurred for a moment, and he shook his head to clear it. His mouth was as dry and sore as if he had swallowed feathers, so he limped over to a puddle that lay in a muddy rut close to the fence. The water was black and brackish, but he forced himself to lap until his throat had stopped hurting.

A blackbird pecked at the ground farther along the fence. Tigerclaw gathered his haunches beneath him and crept toward the bird, testing each of his legs. He felt weak, but a careful check of his belly showed that the wound had stopped bleeding and the edges were starting to crust over with dark red scabs. As long as he didn't stretch too much, he should be able to hunt. *Better to die from hunting than from letting myself starve.*

As he drew closer to the bird, he stepped onto a heap of pine needles that crackled. The blackbird let out a squawk and flapped noisily into the air. Tigerclaw cursed under his breath and sat down. He licked the ruffled, dusty fur on his chest. It tasted of blood and soil. He spat, then turned and stared into the shadows beneath the wooden den. He'd been aware of rustlings during his restless sleep, the muffled squeaks of mice and a mouthwatering scent in the musty air. It would be a cramped and difficult place to hunt, but no worse than some of the bramble thickets he'd scoured before.

Crouching low, feeling the wound in his belly strain, Tigerclaw slipped under the den. The soil rose up on the far side, blocking out the light. Tigerclaw headed for the thickest shadows, feeling his whiskers quiver as he picked up the scents of tiny furred creatures. He paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the half-light, then lunged toward the tiny twin glints that gave away a mouse staring back at him, terrified. There was a satisfying fat crunch under his paws, a high-pitched squeak cut short, and Tigerclaw buried his muzzle in the warm blood and fur of his fresh-kill. He saw no need to thank StarClan for his prey; it was his catch, his alone.

The mouse sent strength surging through his legs, and Tigerclaw emerged, blinking, into the light, shaking loose soil from his pelt. He squeezed between the wooden posts and set off through the pine trees at an uneven trot, gritting his teeth against the pain in his belly. He was outside ThunderClan scent marks here, but there was precious little undergrowth, so a passing patrol would spot him from a long way off. The tall wooden fences and red stone walls that marked the edge of Twolegplace loomed through the trees. The trunks thinned out and brambles and dense clumps of ferns began tangling around Tigerclaw's paws. He lowered his head and began sniffing where fronds had been bent back by a passing creature. *There!* Barely a fox-length from the ThunderClan border, he picked up the acrid, fear-stained scent of the cats who had fought alongside him in the attack.

Fought? More like turned tail like frightened kits! came the voice in Tigerclaw's head. *You were a fool to trust them!* Tigerclaw flattened his ears. *I had no choice! But now that I am free from my bonds to ThunderClan, things will be different.*

Stepping carefully through the thick grass, Tigerclaw followed the scents along the very edge of Twolegplace. Splashes of blood left a visible trail, and he hoped the cats were not too badly wounded. He didn't have time to nurse anyone. These pitiful creatures were weak enough already. He kept one ear pricked toward ThunderClan territory, listening for a patrol. The sun was high overhead, the shadows at the foot of the Twoleg boundary barely wide enough to conceal him. Tigerclaw guessed that his former Clanmates would be resting after morning patrols, sharing fresh-kill before setting out again. His belly growled at the thought of food, but he forced himself to keep going. He wouldn't be caught taking prey that belonged to ThunderClan!

The rumble of the Thunderpath drifted through the trees, and the scent of scared cats was muffled by the stench of monsters and their foul black breath. Tigerclaw forced his way into a solid clump of brambles, guessing that if he were frightened and wounded, he'd seek the thickest cover. He stiffened as he heard tiny whispers ahead of him.

"Keep still! Someone's coming!"

"Has a ThunderClan patrol found us? We can't stay here and be trapped like rabbits!"

"Hush! They'll hear us!"

Tigerclaw burst through the wall of thorns with a yowl. Five pairs of eyes stared at him in horror. Then, one by one, they blinked and lost the sheen of terror.

"Tigerclaw!" meowed a scrawny brown tom. "You survived!"

"No thanks to you, Clawface," Tigerclaw snarled.

"We were going to come back for you once our wounds had healed," protested a broad-shouldered white tom with one black forepaw. His name was Blackfoot, and like Clawface, he had been a ShadowClan warrior loyal to their leader, Brokenstar, before he had been taken prisoner and his followers driven out of the Clan.

Two other former ShadowClan warriors, a brown tabby named Stumpytail and a gray-and-brown she-cat called Tangleburr, stood up and stepped alongside Tigerclaw to brush their tails against him.

"I'm so pleased to see you," purred Tangleburr, but the row of fur pricking along her spine told Tigerclaw that she was lying. All of these cats, including the former stray Snag, a huge ginger tom who lingered at the back of the makeshift den, watching with wary amber eyes, were terrified to see Tigerclaw risen from the dead. They knew they had failed him, had let themselves get beaten by a bunch of queens and elders in an unguarded camp. Tigerclaw breathed in their fear-scent and felt a thrill of satisfaction. These cats would do anything he wanted. He forced his long claws to stay sheathed, pushed down the urge to rip their ears for leaving him to face his former Clanmates alone. These were the only allies he had for now, and while they were scared of him, and in his debt, he could shape them exactly as he wanted.

He looked around. "Where's Mowgli?" He had found the green-eyed, brown tom among the loners in Twolegplace, spotting at once the potential in his sleek muscles and hard, unflinching gaze. Tigerclaw had vowed to make Mowgli a senior warrior if he fought alongside him, and the brown tom had lapped up his promises as hungrily as any forestborn cat.

Stumpytail shrugged. "I don't know. He got his ears clawed pretty harshly by that brown ThunderClan apprentice—Brackenpaw, I think he's called. We haven't seen him since."

Tigerclaw curled his lip. Beaten by an apprentice? He hoped he hadn't been wrong about Mowgli. Clearly he needed more training, more encouragement to fight to the limits of his strength, even if his opponent still had kitten fluff around his ears.

Clawface limped forward with a scrap of fur and meat in his jaws. He dropped it at Tigerclaw's feet. "I caught this mouse earlier," he mewed. "You can have the rest if you want."

Tigerclaw eyed the pathetic piece of fresh-kill. Would he be showing weakness if he admitted to his hunger and ate it? Or should he take advantage of these cats offering to feed and shelter him? What would a Clan leader do?

Bluestar would look for the weakest elder and give them the fresh-kill, purred the voice. *But is that the kind of leader you want to be?*

Tigerclaw bent his head and devoured the mouse loin in a single bite. He looked up, swiping his tongue around his lips. "We'll need more than that to survive. Who is the least wounded among you?"

Tangleburr raised her tail. "I have a bite on my flank, but it's healing fast." She glanced over her shoulder. "And Snag's fur was thick enough to save him from any deep scratches."

The loner padded out of the shadows. "I'll hunt if you want," he rumbled.

Tigerclaw nodded. "Good. You two, bring back at least two pieces each of fresh-kill."

Tangleburr's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything. *Well done, you're learning,* thought Tigerclaw. The two cats threaded their way out of the brambles.

"Tigerclaw, your belly seems to be bleeding," mewed Blackfoot hesitantly. He stretched out his neck and sniffed at the sticky scarlet fur on Tigerclaw's side.

"It's nothing," snapped Tigerclaw. "It'll heal in a couple of days."

Blackfoot stepped back. "Those ThunderClan cats fought more fiercely than I expected," he admitted. Beside him, Clawface nodded. "Especially that so-called kittypet, Fireheart," Blackfoot went on. "He may have been born in

Twolegplace, but he’s sure learned how to fight like a warrior.”

“He *is* a kittypet!” Tigerclaw spat. “Don’t ever speak of him as a warrior. He has no right to be in the forest, no right to speak to Bluestar as if the blood of the Clans runs in his veins.” He turned away and paced in a tight circle, flicking his tail. “I will find more cats, and teach you how to fight properly, and then we will take on ThunderClan again and Fireheart will *die*!”

CHAPTER 3

Tigerclaw opened his eyes to thin gray light filtering between the brambles. It was not quite dawn, but the air was warm and stuffy from the sleeping cats around him. Moving carefully in order not to disturb Clawface, who was pressed against his spine, Tigerclaw eased himself up and stepped out of the thicket. The Thunderpath was silent and the forest smelled clear and green. He peered through the trees, recognizing even in the half-light which trunks held the border marks for ThunderClan's territory. He felt his fur start to rise as he pictured Fireheart curled in the warriors' den, dreaming of victory. *Sleep peacefully while you can, kittypet.*

There was a crackle of leaves behind him and Snag appeared, shaking dust from his thick pelt. "Have you spotted a patrol?" he asked.

"No, it's too early." Tigerclaw turned and looked toward the Thunderpath, just visible between the tree trunks. "We can't stay here. We don't want to attract attention from ThunderClan, and we need more space for hunting. Wake the others. We'll leave now, before the dawn patrols begin."

Snag vanished back into the brambles, leaving Tigerclaw alone in the woods where he had been born. *I will come back,* he vowed. *But only when I am strong enough to crush Fireheart and ThunderClan along with him.*

Tangleburr was yawning as she pushed her way out of the brambles, but as soon as she saw Tigerclaw her mouth snapped shut and she lifted her head. "Where are we going?"

Tigerclaw flicked his tail toward the Thunderpath. "We'll cross over and skirt the edge of ShadowClan until we reach the wild part of the forest."

Stumpytail looked alarmed. “What if a patrol catches us? We won’t be welcome inside ShadowClan’s borders!”

“The sun hasn’t risen yet. There won’t be any patrols around,” meowed Blackfoot.

Tigerclaw led the cats through the long grass between the edge of the trees and the smooth black Thunderpath. The river of stone was silent, still reeking of monsters but damp with dew, making it quite cool and pleasant to walk on. The cats trotted across and plunged into the grass on the far side. None of them said a word as they entered the close-growing pine trees. Tigerclaw saw Blackfoot’s fur stand on end, and Clawface’s eyes stretch wide as he scanned for hostile former Clanmates. But the woods were as silent here as they had been on the other side of the Thunderpath. The cats crept undisturbed along the fences and walls of Twolegplace until they reached a tangled clump of ancient trees with thick glossy leaves and drooping purple-and-scarlet blooms.

“This is the farthest corner of the territory,” Clawface whispered. “These bushes came from Twolegplace, and they’re so difficult to get through that ShadowClan uses them as a defense against the wild part of the woods.”

“They’ll protect us just as well,” mewed Tigerclaw. “There must be some way through.”

Blackfoot walked along the foot of the branches, which dipped close to the ground. “There is a way,” he muttered. “I got through once when I was an apprentice.”

Tangleburr twitched her ears. “You were lucky you made it back! Who knows what could have happened to you on the other side.”

Snag blinked. “It’s just more trees,” he meowed. “What were you imagining? A Clan of foxes and badgers, waiting to rip your fur off?”

Tangleburr flicked her tail. “I was a loyal ShadowClan warrior,” she huffed. “It wasn’t my business to know what went on beyond the Clan boundaries.”

“Well, that’s changed, hasn’t it?” growled Tigerclaw. “Come on.” Brushing past Blackfoot, he climbed over a gnarled silver branch and wriggled into the center of the tree. He couldn’t see through the dense leaves to the other side, but there was a surprising amount of room among the twisted trunks. He heard the others follow him, and continued to scramble forward, ignoring the tearing pains in his belly. Soon he was surrounded by shiny leaves again, but he forced a way through and plunged into clear space on the other side. The wild part of the woods stretched out in front of him, looking more like ThunderClan than ShadowClan territory, with ancient moss-clad oaks and dappled ash trees rather than straight rows of pine.

The other cats lined up beside him, panting. “So, this is our territory now,” murmured Clawface.

Blackfoot pricked his ears. “That fallen tree over there looks as if it could be a den,” he meowed. He bounded over the mulch-covered ground, leaping twigs and clumps of fungus growing in the damp soil. He vanished behind the fallen oak for a moment, then reappeared on top of the trunk. “It’s perfect!” he yowled. “Come and see!”

Tigerclaw followed the others as they ran like excited kits to explore the oak tree. Finding shelter wasn’t a challenge. Even hunting would be easy here, with nothing but the occasional bold kittypet for competition. They needed to begin battle training as soon as possible—and Tigerclaw needed to find others to join them, because he wasn’t going to trust victory to these few cats again.

When he reached the far side of the fallen tree, Tangleburr and Stumpytail were already dragging ivy out of a scoop in the ground. “This will make a great nest,” meowed Tangleburr through a mouthful of trailing vines.

Snag trotted around the dying branches of the tree. “There’s a puddle of water here,” he announced. “It tastes fresh enough.”

Blackfoot looked at Clawface. “Shall we hunt, and get started on a fresh-kill pile?”

Clawface nodded, but Tigerclaw stepped forward and stopped him in his tracks. “This isn’t a game of mini-Clans,” he warned. “You don’t think I’ve given up on taking over ThunderClan? Bluestar is weaker than she has ever been, and she weakens the whole Clan by putting so much faith in a kittypet. As soon as we are strong enough, we will attack again!”

There was a flash of uncertainty in the other cats’ eyes, and Tigerclaw noticed Blackfoot glance at his belly, as if the white tom was concerned that Tigerclaw’s wound would never heal enough to let him go into battle. *Are you sure these cats know that you are in charge?* whispered the voice in his head. *If they don’t believe that they need you as much as they need food and shelter, you are nothing to them*.

Tigerclaw unsheathed his claws and let them sink into the soft earth. “Hunt, prepare nests, and make sure we cannot be seen by ShadowClan patrols,” he ordered. “Tomorrow we start our training.”

“Snag, don’t be afraid to use your weight against your opponent. If he can’t breathe, he’ll be easier to hit.” Tigerclaw put out his paw and nudged Snag forward so that he was hanging over Clawface, who was starting to look worried.

Stumpytail pricked his ears. “But now Snag is balancing on three paws, so I could knock him over, couldn’t I?” he suggested.

“Yes, but be careful where he lands. You don’t want to crush Clawface.” Tigerclaw stepped back and watched as Snag swiped his paw down toward Clawface at the same moment Stumpytail barged into his haunches. The big ginger tom lurched sideways with a hiss, leaving Clawface to scramble free on the other side. While Snag was on the ground, the other two cats leaped on him.

“Much better,” meowed Tigerclaw. He scanned the trees. “Where are Blackfoot and Tangleburr? They should have been back from hunting ages ago.”

They had been in the wild woods for three sunrises. All the cats were healing well now—even Tigerclaw’s wound had stopped oozing whenever he stretched it—and their temporary den had provided good shelter during a couple of heavy rainfalls. The trees were lush and heavy all around them, and hunting was easy as prey came out to eat the seeds and nuts that had been washed down by the rain.

Stumpytail glanced at Clawface. “They’ll be back soon,” he mewed.

Tigerclaw pounced on the note of uncertainty in his voice. “Where are they?” he growled.

“They haven’t crossed the border, I promise,” mewed Clawface, his ears flattened in distress. “But . . . but we’ve been taking turns to patrol on our side, looking for some sign that ShadowClan is all right. We’re worried about our Clanmates. We’ve been here for a while and haven’t heard or seen any border patrols. What if something terrible has happened?”

Tigerclaw narrowed his eyes. “Why should that matter to you? They are not your Clanmates now.”

Stumpytail lifted his head. “But they were close to us once. We have not stopped thinking about them just because we no longer live among them.” There was a note of defiance in his words that Tigerclaw appreciated. *That kind of loyalty could serve you well,* commented the voice inside his head.

“I’ll go look for them,” he meowed.

Clawface’s eyes widened. “You won’t punish them, will you?”

Fear is the key. “That depends on what they have done.” Tigerclaw padded away from the training area, a clear, smooth space defined by a tree stump, a row of brambles, and a tiny, gritty stream. He plunged into the undergrowth and followed a half-flattened trail to the wall of tangled trees. He guessed the former ShadowClan cats wouldn't spend time patrolling here because it was impossible to see through the dense green leaves, so he trotted along the edge of the barrier until it yielded to more open woodland, where gnarled mossy oaks gave way to tall, whisker-straight pine trees.

It wasn't long before he spotted Blackfoot's white pelt slinking between the trunks. Tangleburr was a few steps behind, better hidden among the foliage. Tigerclaw stayed where he was, just within scenting distance of the ShadowClan border marks, and waited. They seemed to be following the line of the border, not crossing over, but close enough to be seen by any passing cats. They were talking to each other in low, anxious voices.

"Did you forget about battle training?" Tigerclaw meowed when they were within earshot.

Both cats stared at him, guilt shining in their eyes. "We . . . we were just on our way," Blackfoot stammered.

"Don't lie," mewed Tigerclaw, padding up to them and sniffing their fur. "You smell of ShadowClan—more than you did already, I mean. Who have you been talking to?"

Tangleburr flattened her ears. "We didn't cross the border, I promise. We just wanted to see how they were."

Tigerclaw flicked his tail. "How who were?" He wanted to force them to admit that their loyalties still lay with their former Clan, that he would never be able to trust them, that all his training had been for nothing. *You should kill them where they stand,* encouraged the voice.

Blackfoot stepped forward, and Tigerclaw almost flinched as he realized the white tom was as tall and broad-chested as he was. "We have done nothing wrong," Blackfoot insisted. "We just wanted to know why there were so few border patrols. We met Dawncloud and Rowanberry hunting on their own. There is a terrible sickness in ShadowClan, and almost every warrior has been affected. Without hunting patrols, the whole Clan is starving."

"The sickness came from the rats at the Carrionplace," Tangleburr put in. "Runningnose is doing everything he can, but there are too many infected cats."

"Why do you think this is your problem?" Tigerclaw asked mildly. "Your Clanmates will want nothing to do with you because of your connection to Brokenstar."

Blackfoot's eyes flashed. "I was loyal to Brokenstar because he was the leader of my Clan, just as every ShadowClan warrior should have been. I am still a ShadowClan cat, whatever happens."

Tangleburr nodded. "These cats that are sick and starving, they are my kin, my friends. I may have left the territory, but I can't forget them."

For a moment, Tigerclaw felt a stab of envy. He didn't miss a single one of his Clanmates, not treacherous Darkstripe or Longtail, nor the weak and fawning kittypet-lovers among the other warriors. Was he going to lose control of Blackfoot and Tangleburr because of their sentimental attachment to cats who no longer cared about them?

You can't challenge their loyalty, warned the voice. *So use it for your own ends. If ShadowClan is as weak as they say, it poses no threat to your destiny. Remember, mercy is a sign of great power.*

Tigerclaw blinked. "For your own safety, I forbid you to enter ShadowClan's territory," he meowed. "But I want to hear for myself what is happening in their camp. We will wait for the next patrol, and I will speak to them."

They didn't have to wait long. A slow, stumbling crunch of twigs and dried leaves announced the approach of a patrol. Regular pauses told Tigerclaw they were renewing border marks—as if scent alone would keep the ravaged Clan safe. Three cats stumbled into view between the tree trunks. Tigerclaw narrowed his eyes, recognizing Fernshade, Deerfoot, and Boulder. The big gray tom who had been born in Twolegplace spotted the waiting cats first and bounded forward.

“Tangleburr! Blackfoot! Rowanberry told me she had seen you! What are you doing here?” Boulder’s eyes were bright, but his ribs showed beneath his pelt and his flanks were tucked up with hunger.

“We live here now,” Tangleburr meowed, gesturing with her tail in the direction of the fallen oak. “Stumpytail and Clawface are with us . . . and Tigerclaw.”

Boulder’s eyes narrowed. “We’ve heard rumors of an attack on ThunderClan,” he meowed. “Was that you?”

Blackfoot flicked his tail. “That’s not what we want to talk to you about. What is happening in ShadowClan? Are you really dying from this sickness?”

Fernshade padded forward. She looked older than Tigerclaw remembered, her tortoiseshell fur patched and clumpy, and one eye stuck shut with weeping yellow ooze. “We have been sick from the rats before, but never this bad,” she rasped. “Runningnose hasn’t slept for a quarter moon, trying to find enough herbs for us all.”

“Why are you telling them this?” snarled Deerfoot, shouldering his way between his Clanmates. “These cats are no longer our Clanmates. They turned their back on the warrior code when they chose to follow Brokenstar.” He glared at Blackfoot and Tangleburr, then let his gaze rest on Tigerclaw. “And this cat is not to be trusted,” he growled softly. “What are you planning, Tigerclaw? I thought your Clanmates would have clawed your fur off by now.”

Tigerclaw forced his pelt to lie flat. “I chose to leave,” he meowed. “ThunderClan is ruled by a kittypet now that Bluestar listens to Fireheart before anyone else.”

Deerfoot’s nostrils flared. “I can’t imagine you giving up that easily, Tigerclaw.”

Tangleburr rested her nose against Fernshade’s flank. “You look so tired,” she mewed sadly. “Would you like us to hunt for you?”

“No!” snapped Tigerclaw and Deerfoot at the same time.

“We can hunt for ourselves,” insisted the ShadowClan cat.

“You owe these cats nothing,” hissed Tigerclaw. “I’ve heard enough. Come, follow me.” He turned, and for a moment his heart beat faster as he wondered if Tangleburr and Blackfoot would obey. There was a brief silence, then he heard paw steps padding after him.

“May StarClan light your path!” Fernshade called.

“And yours,” Tangleburr whispered in reply.

“We meet again, Tigerclaw!” snarled the ginger cat. “And this time, I won’t let you live!”

“Really, Fireheart?” Tigerclaw sneered. “Have you forgotten that you’re nothing but a soft-bellied *kittypet*?” He launched himself forward, claws raking the air in search of the orange pelt. All around him, he could hear ThunderClan cats yowling in fury, and the thud and scrape of paws as blows were landed. In his dream, Tigerclaw looked desperately around, trying to see who was fighting alongside him. Was he supposed to take on the whole of his former Clan alone?

But instead of well-trained ranks of warriors matching his strikes, there were nothing but shadows—shadows filled with shrieks and the crash of paw steps, but thin black air nonetheless. Tigerclaw felt Fireheart’s claws find the half-healed wound on his belly and he leaped sideways, snapping his teeth where the tom’s neck should be.

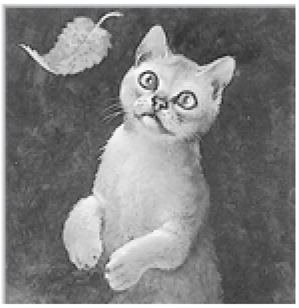
His jaws closed on a mouthful of dusty leaves, and Tigerclaw woke coughing and churning the leaf-mold with his paws.

“Are you all right?” Clawface asked sleepily from beside him.

“Fine,” growled Tigerclaw. He stood up and left the nest, shaking the bad dream from his pelt. If he had to fight every battle alone, he would not give up! Even with an army of shadows, he would still win!

He paused. He had dreamed of shadows fighting alongside him, screeching and matching him blow for blow. He tipped back his head and looked up at the milky sky between the branches. *Was it an omen from StarClan?*

Would it be ShadowClan *that helped him destroy Fireheart?*



CHAPTER 4

Tigerclaw waited until the patrol was nearly on top of him before stepping out from behind the clump of brittle ferns. Rowanberry stopped dead, her brown-and-cream pelt already spiking along her back. Behind her, the patrol scrambled to a halt, staring at Tigerclaw in alarm.

Tigerclaw flicked his tail. “I come in peace,” he rumbled. “I know about the sickness in ShadowClan. My friends and I will hunt for you, asking nothing in return except that your former Clanmates are forgiven for their misguided loyalty to Brokenstar. They know they were wrong, and they want to make amends.”

Rowanberry peered past him. “I don’t see them here, though.”

Tigerclaw bent his head. “They don’t know I’m talking to you. They would be too proud to beg for your forgiveness, so I am appealing on their behalf. Please, let us stock your fresh-kill pile, find herbs for Runningnose, at least until you have beaten this sickness.”

Dawncloud stepped forward, her pale ginger coat glowing in the dawn sunlight. “Do they want to come back to the camp?” she asked.

Tigerclaw shook his head. “No, we will stay out here, in the den we have made for ourselves. I promise, we want nothing else but to help you.”

“I can understand why our former Clanmates might want to hunt for us,” meowed Flintfang, a gray tom who looked ready to join the elders, if his legs held up long enough to get back to the camp. “But why you, Tigerclaw? You have never been a friend to ShadowClan.”

Tigerclaw shrugged. “I am rival to no Clan now that I live outside any borders. Your Clanmates helped me not so long ago, and I am in their debt."

The old tom narrowed his eyes. "I don't know what Nightstar would say about this."

"He'd say, 'Pride won't stock the fresh-kill pile!'" retorted Dawncloud spiritedly. "Tigerclaw, it's a generous offer, and we accept."

"But you don't need to bring the fresh-kill to the camp," meowed Flintfang. "We'll meet you here at dawn tomorrow, and take it from you."

Tigerclaw nodded. "Of course, if that's what you wish. Have a safe journey back to your camp. We will be here tomorrow." He turned before the cats could speak again and pushed deeper into the ferns. *Mercy is a sign of great power.* By the time the sun rose again, ShadowClan would be in his debt.

Blackfoot and Tangleburr were delighted to hear that ShadowClan would let them hunt on its behalf, but Clawface was less trusting.

"What if it's a trap?" he muttered. "They may be sick, but they still outnumber us. Once we're inside the camp, anything could happen."

"They're taking the fresh-kill from us on the border," Tigerclaw mewed. "I'm not putting any of us in danger for the sake of filling their bellies."

The ancient oak trees offered good hunting, though the ground was damper than Tigerclaw was used to. Snag managed to knock a squirrel clean out of a tree with a single blow from his paw, and Tangleburr returned with a brace of frogs dangling from her mouth.

"ShadowClan cats *like* them," she mewed defensively when Tigerclaw curled his lip.

By the time they returned to the clump of ferns at the border, Tigerclaw was satisfied with their offering. Enough to make a significant contribution to a Clan's fresh-kill pile, but not so much that it looked like hunting for ShadowClan was the only concern these cats had in their lives. Even after two long hunts the day before, Tigerclaw had insisted on battle practice as the sun sank behind the trees. Tangleburr's strong neck muscles gave her a ferocious bite, and Tigerclaw had been encouraging her to sharpen her teeth on the stump of an old apple tree, which had the strongest wood. Snag was becoming less cautious about using his weight to his advantage, and it had taken Stumpytail several moments to catch his breath after a particularly heavy blow.

"You came."

Tigerclaw ignored the faint note of surprise in Flintfang's voice. "I always keep my promises," he meowed.

Boulder lowered his head and sniffed the heap of prey. "This will fill our fresh-kill pile better than it has been for days," he commented.

Dawncloud blinked warmly at her former Clanmates. "Thank you. I'll make sure Nightstar knows what you have done. There will be no grudges against you after this."

"Good," Tigerclaw mewed. "And to make sure that Nightstar knows precisely who has helped him, we'll help you take this to the camp."

Boulder tensed. "You said you'd stay out of ShadowClan territory for now. We can't guarantee how our Clanmates will react."

Tigerclaw stepped confidently across the scent line. "As Dawncloud said, your Clanmates will only be grateful for our help." He looked over his shoulder at the cats waiting by the ferns. "Come on, all of you." The former ShadowClan cats padded warily to join him. Snag brought up the rear, his nostrils flaring as the scent of the Clan washed over him.

Tigerclaw picked up the squirrel—the largest piece of prey—and gestured with his tail to prompt the others to help. Flintfang narrowed his eyes but said nothing. Dawncloud led the way back through the pines, reaching out with her tail to brush against Stumpytail. Tigerclaw knew they had been close friends as apprentices, and he decided to watch the brown tom closely to make sure his loyalties didn’t return too wholeheartedly to his former Clan.

As they approached the thicket of brambles where ShadowClan made its camp, a wave of stench filled Tigerclaw’s mouth and nose. Behind his mouthful of squirrel, he tried not to retch, and he could tell by the looks of alarm on his companions’ faces that they were equally repulsed.

Boulder put down the sparrow he was carrying and halted just outside the entrance to the camp. “No cat has escaped the sickness,” he meowed quietly. “If you don’t want to risk getting infected, you should turn back now.”

Tigerclaw lifted his head. “We are not afraid to deliver help,” he insisted around his mouthful of squirrel fur. Beside him, Blackfoot nodded, although Snag looked increasingly reluctant to keep going.

They followed Boulder through the gap in the brambles, into the clearing at the center of the camp. Tigerclaw spotted the remains of a fresh-kill pile in a corner—now a pitiful scraping of bones and feathers—and strode over to it. He deposited the squirrel and turned to look around. Dozens of eyes gleamed from the shadows under the thorns, and the air was filled with shocked whispers.

Rowanberry emerged from a den. “Dawncloud told us you were going to hunt for us. We didn’t expect you to deliver it yourselves.”

Tangleburr dropped her frogs on the pile and trotted over to her old Clanmate. “We had to know how you are,” she mewed. “Please don’t send us away.”

There was a faint rustle of branches behind Tigerclaw, and he spun around to see Runningnose, the sickly ShadowClan medicine cat, stumble out beside a black tom who was so thin, his fur looked as if it was sliding from his bones.

“You did a brave thing, coming here,” Nightstar rasped.

Tigerclaw dipped his head. “Your former Clanmates would not stand by and let you starve, and my loyalty is to them now. This is not courage, it is merely following the warrior code.”

Dawncloud went over to Nightstar. “Look, do you see the fresh-kill pile?” she prompted gently. “We will all fill our bellies tonight!”

“We can still hunt for ourselves,” growled a voice from the side of the clearing. Deerfoot walked forward, his eyes glistening with what Tigerclaw thought might be the beginnings of the infection. “These cats left our Clan for a reason. Maybe we should think twice before welcoming them back.”

Runningnose flattened his ears. “*These cats*, as you call them, may have saved us all from starving to death,” he meowed. “Show them some gratitude, Deerfoot.”

Clawface was looking around. “Where’s Cinderfur?” he asked. “I heard he’d been made deputy.”

Rowanberry padded over to him. Tigerclaw recalled that she and Clawface had been mates a long time ago, and Cinderfur was one of their kits. “He died, Clawface,” she whispered, leaning into the fur on his shoulder. “He was the one who brought the sickness into the camp, when he caught an infected rat.”

Clawface swayed and took a step back. “He died?” he echoed. “I should have been here, Rowanberry. If I had caught that rat instead . . .”

The she-cat tapped his mouth with her tail. “Hush. Our son walks with StarClan now. He will know what you have done for us today.”

Tigerclaw put his head on one side. “Who replaced Cinderfur as deputy?” he asked Nightstar.

The old leader started, as if he had dozed off while still on his feet.

“Nightstar has been too sick to choose a new deputy,” Runningnose put in. He stepped a little closer to the black tom so that he was supporting some of his weight. Tigerclaw thought he had never seen a weaker, more pitiful-looking pair of cats. “I fulfill the duties of a deputy for now,” the medicine cat went on.

Tigerclaw couldn’t imagine that took up much time. There weren’t enough healthy cats to organize regular hunting or border patrols, as he and the others had noticed from the other side of the boundary. He felt a stir of curiosity in his belly. A sick, elderly leader, no deputy, a medicine cat run ragged trying to treat the illness that ravaged his Clanmates . . . ShadowClan was sinking faster than a stone in a river.

Nightstar twitched and stood more upright. “Tigerclaw, you are most welcome to stay and share the fresh-kill with us,” he meowed formally. He gestured with his tail. “Please help yourself first.”

Tigerclaw bowed his head low. “We wouldn’t dream of it, Nightstar,” he mewed. “We caught this prey for you. ShadowClan’s need is far greater than ours. But, if you will allow it, we will continue to hunt on your behalf, until your Clanmates are strong and well again.”

Nightstar let out a faint purr. “You are so kind,” he rasped. “May StarClan light your path, always.”

“Oh, they will,” Tigerclaw murmured as he turned and summoned his cats with a flick of his tail. Clawface drew reluctantly away from Rowanberry, and Stumpytail cast a yearning glance toward Dawncloud, but they all followed him as he padded out of the camp and into the pine trees.

“I’ll show you to the border,” Flintfang offered, but Tigerclaw shook his head.

“Stay and eat with your Clanmates,” he urged. “We know the way back.”

Behind him, the other cats whispered their shock to one another, at finding their former Clan so ill and weak. Snag was sympathetic, vowing to catch every squirrel in the woods if that’s what it took to make the cats well again.

Tigerclaw listened with half an ear. He didn't care if every ShadowClan cat got sick and died. For now, he had an entire Clan in his debt, and that could only work in his favor.

If mercy is power, then I have never been more powerful.

The following day, Tigerclaw let the others go off and hunt for ShadowClan again, on the understanding that after sunhigh they would have a session of battle training. When the cats had crashed noisily through the bracken, deeper into the woods, Tigerclaw headed in the other direction, toward Twolegplace. The memory of Mowgli nagged at him; the loner may have turned tail and fled during the clash with ThunderClan warriors, but there had been something about the young brown cat—his eagerness to learn about Clan life, his appetite for battle—that suggested he might still be useful. Tigerclaw pictured the last time he had seen Mowgli, grappling with Fireheart, aiming his claws at the kittypet's throat, before Brackenpaw had caught him off balance and dragged him away. Tigerclaw knew he couldn't judge Mowgli too harshly, not after Fireheart had overpowered him in Bluestar's den. This Twolegplace rogue had skills that could be very helpful indeed. Tigerclaw decided that he was willing to give him one more chance. But if the brown cat failed again, he would regret it more than anything else in his life.

He reached a tall wooden fence and squeezed through a gap between the panels. His head spun as the cloying scents of Twolegplace crashed around him: flowers in colors that were rarely found in the woods, the sickly-sweet smell of too-short grass, and underlying everything, the stench of monsters, spewing their foul breath on the maze of Thunderpaths. Tigerclaw pushed through a bush with pale green leaves and jumped over a low stone wall. On each side, a narrow black path led between red stone Twoleg nests. He had a vague memory of being here before. If he went this way—he turned and trotted over the harsh stone, keeping to the shadow at one side—he could come to a dusty open space where strays came to bask in the sun. Ahead of him, the light grew brighter until he had to screw up his eyes. The sheltered path came to an abrupt end, and Tigerclaw peered into the bright white expanse. Several furry shapes lay on their sides, tails flicking lazily.

A head lifted up close to him. “We’ve got company,” the silver-furred she-cat mewed to her companion.

A fat brown tabby looked over at Tigerclaw. “He stinks.”

“That’s what forest cats smell like,” meowed the first cat. “What are you doing here, stranger? Did you forget how to catch squirrels?”

Tigerclaw ignored them. A flash of movement on the far side of the space had caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes and just made out a lean black shape with a distinctive pointed muzzle before it vanished behind a pile of stones. Pelt pricking, he padded around the edge of the space. Most of the strays paid no attention to him, though one growled at him to stop casting a shadow. Tigerclaw reached the place where he had seen the brown cat disappear and sniffed the broken rocks. He knew that scent . . .

“Mowgli?” he called softly.

He heard a rustle in the long grass behind the stones. “Tigerclaw?” came a cautious whisper. There was a pause, then a thin brown tom slid out. His eyes were huge and wary, and the fur pricked along his spine. “Did . . . did you come looking for me?”

Tigerclaw blinked. “I don’t make a habit of coming into Twolegplace,” he snarled.

Mowgli slunk closer, his head so low that his muzzle almost touched the ground. “I’m sorry, Tigerclaw,” he mewed. “I know I shouldn’t have let that cat chase me off. I know how much you wanted that ginger tom killed.”

“Mistakes belong to the past,” Tigerclaw growled. He wasn’t going to let Mowgli think he wasn’t disappointed with him. “I want to know if you’d let it happen again.”

The brown cat looked up at him, his green eyes hungry for approval. “Never!” he vowed. “I’d spill the last drop of my blood to fight alongside you again!”

“I won’t ask that of you yet,” mewed Tigerclaw. “Things have changed. The other cats and I are living near ShadowClan now, but I still intend to destroy ThunderClan one day. And kill that ginger cat,” he finished with a hiss.

Mowgli stood up straight, almost as tall at the shoulder as Tigerclaw. “Let me finish what I started,” he declared. “You won’t regret it, Tigerclaw.”

“I’ll make sure I won’t,” Tigerclaw meowed. “Come, we have a lot to do.” He turned and trotted straight across the open space, deliberately scuffing a small cloud of dust toward the dozing strays. He heard them cough and curse behind him, but he and Mowgli had vanished into the gap between the Twoleg nests before the cats could haul their lazy bodies up.

Chapter 5

When Tigerclaw returned to the fallen tree with Mowgli at his heels, Snag looked surprised but greeted his old friend warmly and showed him where he could make a nest. Blackfoot was more cautious.

"Are you sure you can trust him?" he mewed to Tigerclaw.

"If you think he might be a spy for ThunderClan, that's highly unlikely," Tigerclaw pointed out. "Last time ThunderClan saw him, he was trying to claw Fireheart's throat."

"I didn't mean that he might favor ThunderClan now," Blackfoot argued. "I just wondered how much we can rely on a cat who turned tail at the first sign of battle. What if he leaves us again?"

"Then he won't come back," Tigerclaw answered. "He knows this is his last chance."

Tangleburr padded over to join them. "We're ready for battle training when you are, Tigerclaw," she mewed. "Oh, and Clawface and I saw some ShadowClan cats by the border while we were hunting. They wanted to know if they could hunt with us tomorrow."

Tigerclaw frowned. "What, in these woods?"

"No," meowed Tangleburr. "Inside ShadowClan territory. That's where they know the best places to find prey. But they thought they might be more successful if we helped."

Tigerclaw felt a ripple of satisfaction run through his fur. Had ShadowClan warriors already realized how much they needed him and his companions? He waited a few moments before replying. "Very well, but we will still hunt separately for ourselves. ShadowClan must understand that we can survive without them."

Tangleburr nodded. “Of course. Thanks, Tigerclaw. I . . . er . . . told Wetfoot that we’d meet them at the border just before sunhigh.” She blinked nervously. “If you said it was okay.”

Tigerclaw flicked the tip of his tail, just enough to warn Tangleburr that he knew she had promised help too easily. The she-cat looked down at her paws.

Mowgli was looking confused. “I thought you hated the Clans,” he meowed.

“Only ThunderClan,” Tigerclaw growled. “ShadowClan is suffering from sickness and hunger. If we are strong enough to help them, we will.”

Clawface padded past them, heading into the shade of the oak tree. “I might take a nap,” he muttered. “Before we practice battle moves.”

Tigerclaw blocked him with one paw. “Will you always be able to take a nap before an enemy attacks? No. You’ll train now, with the energy that you have. Understand?”

There was a flash of anger in Clawface’s eyes, then he nodded. “I understand, Tigerclaw.”

Good, whispered the voice in Tigerclaw’s mind. *These cats must make no decisions on their own, not unless you want them to feel more powerful than you.*

Tigerclaw felt his muscles tense across his shoulders. *Never*, he vowed silently.

The following day, as the sun reached the tops of the trees, Tigerclaw was gratified to see the relief in the eyes of the gray tabby tom waiting for them at the border.

“I thought you might change your mind,” Wetfoot gabbled as they drew near.

Tangleburr glanced sideways at Tigerclaw. “We will help you if we can,” she mewed carefully.

Tigerclaw stepped over the border. “Right, which way are we going first?”

A small, light brown cat pricked his ears. “Wetfoot’s leading this patrol,” he chirped.

Wetfoot quickly shook his head. “It’s fine, Oakpaw. Tigerclaw can lead us.”

A bony, black she-cat scraped the mulch on the ground. “My belly thinks my throat’s been slashed,” she muttered. “Are we hunting or talking?”

“Okay, Darkflower, keep your fur on,” teased Blackfoot, and Tigerclaw was reminded with a jolt that his companions—apart from Snag and Mowgli—knew these cats far better than he did, were friends and even kin with them. He couldn’t let that become a weakness for him.

“We’ll keep to the border with the wild woods,” he announced. “Follow me, and wait for my command to begin stalking.”

“We usually scent our own prey,” Oakpaw began, but Tangleburr cut in.

“Whatever you think best, Tigerclaw,” she meowed.

Tigerclaw plunged forward, relishing the feel of the ground beneath his paws, breathing in the green scents of the forest that swallowed him up. Behind him, the other cats matched him stride for stride; ahead of them stretched a swath of silent trees, swollen with prey just waiting to be caught.

“Why exactly did you leave ThunderClan?” meowed Applefur. The mottled brown she-cat was lying in a patch of sunlight, lazily flicking her tail.

Tigerclaw studied her, noticing the gleam of curiosity in her pale green gaze. He had just returned to the ShadowClan camp with another successful hunting patrol. The young warrior Russetfur had impressed him in particular—she had been raised in Twolegplace with Boulder, but she was as sharp and lethal as a forestborn cat when it came to chasing prey. Around him, ShadowClan cats ate peacefully, enjoying the feel of sun on their patchy coats. All except

Nightstar, who was too sick to come out of his den; Tigerclaw could hear him coughing behind the screen of brambles.

He traced a line in the dust with one long claw. “You’ll hear enough rumors about me to make up your own stories,” he meowed.

Applefur blinked and let her cheek rest on the ground. “That’s why I’m asking you for the truth.”

Tigerclaw stood up and surveyed the clearing. “I cannot be loyal to a Clan that listens to a kittypet over its deputy. I still believe in the warrior code, even if my former Clanmates don’t.”

“Are you talking about Fireheart?” asked Ratscar, a young warrior with the claw mark that had given him his warrior name standing out against his dark brown fur.

Tigerclaw curled his lip. “If you don’t want another stripe in your pelt, you won’t mention his name around here,” he growled. He nodded to Blackfoot, who was talking to Fernshade. “Come, it’s time we left.”

A dark gray tom lifted his head from a pigeon he was sharing with the other elders. “Do you have to leave already?” he called. “The sun won’t set for a while. I was going to tell you about the time I found a badger stuck in the marshes.”

Tigerclaw made himself look disappointed. “Next time, Cedarheart, I’d love to hear that tale. My friends and I have imposed ourselves on your Clan for long enough today.” With a flick of his tail, he gathered his companions around him.

“You’ll come back tomorrow, won’t you?” mewed Runningnose, poking his head out of Nightstar’s den. “I . . . I thought you might arrange the hunting patrols for me. I need to look for more herbs across the border.”

Tigerclaw tipped his head on one side. “If you wish, Runningnose. We’ll be here soon after dawn.” He padded out of the camp, letting his companions call their farewells over their shoulders.

They are beginning to need you like the forest needs rain, whispered the voice in his head. *Good work, Tigerclaw.*

The four cats looked excited and proud to have been chosen for Tigerclaw's hunting patrol. Russetfur's lean muscles strained beneath her fox-colored fur as if she was already picturing her first pounce, while Ratscar was flexing his claws, checking them for sharpness. Clawface looked as composed as ever, but his ears were pricked and the tip of his tail twitched. Beside him stood Whitethroat, a black-and-white tom who was small for his age but seemed quick and keen. Tigerclaw wanted to see just how fast he could move.

"I thought we'd hunt something other than ShadowClan prey today," Tigerclaw announced.

Russetfur tipped her head to one side. "What else is there?"

"Perhaps prey from somewhere else?" mewed Clawface, his eyes beginning to gleam.

Tigerclaw nodded. "Let's try ThunderClan," he suggested, watching each warrior closely.

Russetfur and Ratscar braced their shoulders and narrowed their eyes, but Whitethroat took a step back.

"Th . . . ThunderClan?" he stammered. "Really? But that would be stealing!"

Tigerclaw blinked. "Do you have a problem, Whitethroat?"

The little cat looked down at his paws. "I would rather not take prey from ThunderClan, that's all," he meowed.

Clawface crossed to stand beside Tigerclaw. "There are rumors," he began quietly, "that Whitethroat and Littlecloud sought shelter in ThunderClan during the worst of the sickness."

"Do you think that's true?" Tigerclaw hissed.

Clawface studied the black-and-white warrior, who seemed to be trying to shrink inside his own pelt. “I can imagine two frightened cats trying to escape from a Clan that was dying around them,” he mewed.

“Then we need to make sure their loyalty to their own Clan hasn’t faltered,” Tigerclaw stated grimly. Raising his voice, he meowed, “Whitethroat, this is not a hunt-if-you-want-to patrol. You will follow where I lead, is that clear?” He padded over to the warrior and let his claws slide out. “All other Clans are enemies to ShadowClan. If we want to take prey from them, there should be nothing to stop us. Do you understand?”

Looking terrified, the small cat nodded. Tigerclaw let his gaze drift around the clearing until it settled on Littlecloud. The gray tabby was shuffling through some herbs for Runningnose. Tigerclaw curled his lip. Now that Littlecloud was an apprentice medicine cat, it would be hard to test his loyalty in the form of hunting or battle. Tigerclaw would have to keep an eye on him.

“Let’s go,” he meowed, curling his tail over his back and leading the way out of the camp at a brisk trot. He swiveled his ears to check that four sets of paws were following, then ducked into the tangled, brittle grass where tiny paths would lead them to the tunnel that ran beneath the Thunderpath. Before he ducked into the narrow hole, Tigerclaw paused to take one last breath of ShadowClan scent. Was this where he belonged now? He hadn’t been into ThunderClan territory since . . . He pushed aside the memory of Bluestar ordering him to leave and ran into the tunnel. His paw steps echoed hollowly around him for a moment, then he burst into the thick green forest on the other side. *Home!* screeched his traitorous senses as countless smells of leaves and ferns and lush green growing things filled his nose. Woven among them were traces of tiny furred creatures, rustling through the undergrowth, scrambling over mossy tree trunks, leaving their invisible trails for hungry cats to follow.

"Wow!" breathed Ratscar. "This smells like good hunting!"

Tigerclaw nodded. "Stay close to the Thunderpath for now. There's no point drawing attention to ourselves before we've had a chance to catch a decent haul."

He plunged into the bracken, relishing the feel of dew-damp leaves brushing against his spine. Almost at once he heard the crunch of a mouse nibbling on a seed. Dropping into the hunter's crouch, he crept forward, one paw step at a time, until his muzzle pushed aside a frond of bracken and revealed the small brown creature. Tigerclaw bunched his hindquarters beneath him, then sprang silently past the frond to land right on top of the mouse. It let out a faint squeak, soft and warm and delicious-smelling in Tigerclaw's paws. He swallowed the water that had surged into his mouth and buried his prey quickly.

Behind him, the ShadowClan cats were staring openmouthed.

"That was fast!" Russetfur commented.

Tigerclaw felt a surge of pride. This was his territory now; he knew every hunting trick his ancestors had ever thought up. He shrugged as if it was no big deal and shouldered his way past an elder bush, drooping with heavy white flowers. The scent tickled his nose and almost made him sneeze, but he stopped when he heard a soft crackle on the other side of the bush. Peering through, Tigerclaw spotted three light brown shapes slipping between a pair of tall ash trees, along a trail that led to the border. A ThunderClan patrol! He squinted, identifying Mousefur, Runningwind, and Thornclaw. A memory flashed into Tigerclaw's mind of those three cats sneering at him as he padded from the ThunderClan camp for the last time. Each one had treated him no better than a captured prisoner, battered and defeated by their precious kittypet. Tigerclaw felt a slow flame of rage burn in his belly.

This was too good an opportunity to miss. “ShadowClan cats!” he yowled over his shoulder. *“Attack!”*

Chapter 6

Tigerclaw exploded through the bush and launched himself onto Runningwind’s narrow brown back. The warrior dropped beneath him like a stone. Tigerclaw let his talons sink into Runningwind’s throat and fought back a yowl of delight as blood welled up around his paws. Behind him he heard Mousefur and Thornclaw racing away, their paw steps rapidly fading in the direction of the camp. “Cowards!” Tigerclaw spat.

“Great StarClan!” gasped Russetfur. “You’ve killed him!”

Tigerclaw stepped off Runningwind’s unmoving body. “He should have reacted more quickly,” he mewed.

Whitethroat padded forward on trembling legs and lowered his nose to sniff Runningwind’s pelt. “But . . . he wasn’t expecting to be attacked! He was just on a patrol.”

“A good warrior is always ready,” growled Tigerclaw. “Now, who is going to help me find the others?”

Clawface scraped his paw along the ground. “For what reason? We have trespassed on their territory. You’ve *killed* a warrior! We don’t want to drag our Clanmates into a battle with ThunderClan. We are not yet strong enough for that!”

Tigerclaw let his hackles rise. “There is always a reason to attack another Clan! More territory, better prey, the chance to prove how strong you are!”

“But we’re *not* strong,” Ratscar protested. “And we don’t want to take over ThunderClan’s territory or hunt their prey.”

In the distance, they heard cats approaching fast, crashing through undergrowth, not caring how much prey they scared away. Clawface stepped forward. “Tigerclaw, we came here to hunt, not to fight. This is not a battle we can win. Not yet.”

Russetfur shifted her paws. “We need to get out of here!”

Tigerclaw forced the fur along his spine to lie flat. *Make them think it’s your decision to retreat, not theirs*, warned the voice in his head. *Otherwise this could be the dumbest thing you’ve ever done.* “Fine. This warrior”—he kicked Runningwind’s body and it shuddered like a leaf in the wind—“will be a clear enough message that ShadowClan is growing powerful again.” He flicked his tail in the moment before Clawface, Russetfur, and Ratscar plunged into the elder bush and raced back to the Thunderpath. *I gave you the signal to retreat! Remember that!*

Whitethroat stayed where he was, his muzzle buried in the dead warrior’s still-warm fur. “Are you coming?” Tigerclaw snarled. Whitethroat didn’t move. “Waiting for your ThunderClan friends to arrive, are you?” Tigerclaw spat. “I knew I couldn’t trust you. Know this, Whitethroat. You won’t be welcome in ShadowClan again, I promise.”

“It’s this way!” Mousefur screeched from the other side of a clump of bracken. “Hurry!”

Tigerclaw lifted his head and sniffed. Beneath the acrid tang of the Thunderpath, he detected Fireheart and Whitestorm, closing in on him fast. Much as he longed to stay and watch them grieve for Runningwind, he knew he couldn’t take them all on. He turned and slipped into the elder bush just as Fireheart pounded into the clearing beneath the ash trees.

“He’s dead!” Whitethroat wailed.

Tigerclaw burst out from the bush and tore along the trail through the bracken. Brittle fronds whipped his pelt and stung his eyes. He stopped, flanks heaving, on the edge of the Thunderpath. Suddenly, to Tigerclaw’s astonishment, Whitethroat appeared a little way off, struggling through the brambles. He was wide-eyed and panting, and blood smeared his cheek.

Is he leading an attack on ShadowClan? Tigerclaw wondered, bracing himself to run and warn the others.

Traitor!

Fireheart scrambled out behind Whitethroat, and the black-and-white warrior whipped his head around to stare at the ginger cat.

Bring whoever you want! I will kill them all! Tigerclaw vowed.

Without stopping to speak to Fireheart, Whitethroat flung himself onto the Thunderpath. Tigerclaw took a step back as a monster blasted past, flinging grit and foul smoke into his face. When the air stopped whirling, he saw Fireheart staring in horror at a black-and-white shape that lay in the middle of the Thunderpath. *The monster hit Whitethroat!* Tigerclaw narrowed his eyes. *Will ThunderClan still attack?*

On the unforgiving black stone, Whitethroat stirred. Fireheart ran over to him. He crouched down and seemed to be speaking to Whitethroat, but his words were drowned by another monster roaring past. By the time Tigerclaw could see Fireheart again, he was standing up. Whitethroat was sprawled at his paws, eyes glazed and open, a trickle of blood coming from his mouth. Tigerclaw felt his fur prick. Fireheart was staring straight at him.

“Is chasing puny cats to their deaths the best you can do to defend your territory?” Tigerclaw yowled.

In answer, Fireheart hurtled toward him, narrowly missing two monsters, and launched himself at Tigerclaw. Taken by surprise, Tigerclaw staggered backward, feeling the scents of ThunderClan rise up around him from the thick grass. Fireheart’s paws pummeled his ribs, but Tigerclaw wrenched himself free and reared up, flinging the ginger cat onto the ground. Tigerclaw let his full weight crash down on him, sinking his claws into the fur around Fireheart’s throat. Fury burned inside him.

“Are you listening, kittypet?” he hissed. “I will kill you, and all your warriors, one by one.”

Suddenly there was a roar of thundering paws, and a voice meowed in Tigerclaw’s ear, “Did you think we would let you fight alone?"

He turned and looked into Blackfoot's hungry gaze. "No, my friend," mewed Tigerclaw. "I knew you would come."

Blackfoot had brought nearly every cat that wasn't sick with him—including Russetfur and Ratscar, Tigerclaw noticed. As the ShadowClan cats hurtled across the Thunderpath, Mousefur and Whitestorm burst out of the undergrowth. They fought bravely, but the ThunderClan warriors were sorely outnumbered. Even though Fireheart had managed to wriggle free from Tigerclaw, this wasn't a battle that ShadowClan would lose.

Mowgli rushed forward and sliced at Fireheart's hind legs with his claws. Fireheart stumbled and Tigerclaw reared over him, bracing himself to deliver the deathblow. Mowgli's eyes glittered in triumph. There was a searing pain in Tigerclaw's belly and he looked down, baffled. A broad gray tabby warrior had lunged into Tigerclaw's exposed stomach, tearing at the newly healed wound. *Graystripe! What is he doing here? He lives in RiverClan!*

Tigerclaw fell onto his paws and looked around. His cats were fighting more than the three ThunderClan warriors now. It looked like a whole RiverClan patrol had come to Fireheart's rescue. *Always relying on others for help!* Tigerclaw spat. He braced himself as Fireheart and Graystripe tackled him side by side. Tigerclaw was forced back toward the Thunderpath, then his paw got tangled up in a bramble and he fell heavily onto the ground. He looked around for Mowgli or Blackfoot, but they were wrestling with fish-scented cats. Clawface and Russetfur had retreated to the edge of the Thunderpath, flanks heaving and covered in scratches.

Fireheart glanced up to look at the ShadowClan warriors who were leaving, and Tigerclaw felt the ginger cat's weight shift on his shoulders. He wrenched himself free and raced for the Thunderpath. He heard the other ShadowClan cats fall in behind him, but he didn't slow down until they were all deep inside the pine trees. He limped to a halt beside a patch of brambles, his belly burning with pain and his muzzle stinging from scratches. Around him, the other cats slumped onto the ground and began licking their wounds.

A thin voice whined in Tigerclaw's ear: *You ran! You should have stayed and fought! Never start a battle that you cannot finish, you fool.*

Tigerclaw lifted his head. "We must let the rest of ShadowClan know that we were attacked without provocation," he ordered. He caught Clawface's eye and waited for the brown tom to nod. "Tragically, Whitethroat gave his life trying to save his Clanmates from ThunderClan's savagery. He died at Fireheart's paws, trying to reach the safety of his own territory."

Flintfang snarled, "No warrior kills one of my Clanmates without answering to me. Let me go back to ThunderClan now and avenge Whitethroat's death!"

Tigerclaw let his tail rest on Flintfang's shoulder. "Have patience, my friend. Those RiverClan cats might be waiting for us still. Wait until the ThunderClan warriors have to defend themselves alone, and then we will destroy them without losing a single drop of our own blood."

"Whitethroat will not die in vain!" cried Russetfur, and her Clanmates joined in with a wail of grief.

"ThunderClan got lucky today, that's all," Tigerclaw meowed when they fell silent. "This is not a battle that has been lost. Merely one that has been put off for a while." He met Blackfoot's gaze. The white tom seemed to understand what Tigerclaw was saying. What happened today would be reported to the rest of ShadowClan as a moment of tragedy for Whitethroat and a cause for revenge on ThunderClan when they had their chance. Fireheart's days of leading his band of kittypet-lovers would soon be over.

Chapter 7

Gray, damp ferns brushed against Tigerclaw's pelt as he walked through the forest. Above him, the sky was pitch-black, without the faintest glimmer of moon or stars. Yet somehow there was just enough light for him to make out the trunks of trees looming toward him and the trace of a path over the slimy ground. The air smelled rotten, like fungus or forgotten fresh-kill. The leaves above Tigerclaw whispered even though there was no wind, and a greasy mist seemed to ooze up from the soil and cling to the fur on his belly. *Where am I?* Tigerclaw wondered. *Is this StarClan?*

"No, this is the Dark Forest," came a meow from behind him.

Tigerclaw froze. He knew that voice! It was the one that talked to him inside his head. Pelt standing on end, he slowly turned around.

A broad-faced she-cat stood among the ferns, her tortoiseshell-and-white fur patched and scarred from long-past battles. Her amber eyes gleamed like tiny gold moons; they seemed much brighter than the rest of the she-cat, and Tigerclaw was uncomfortably aware that he could see the leaves and ground on the other side of her.

"Welcome to the Place of No Stars, Tigerclaw," the she-cat meowed.

"This isn't StarClan, then?"

"Tchah!" The old cat spat. "Why would you want to go to StarClan? That place is full of weak-willed cowards who clung to the warrior code like ants to a leaf in a puddle. You will find much better company in the cats here, Tigerclaw."

Tigerclaw shifted his paws. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

The she-cat purred; it sounded like two dead branches sliding together. “I have been watching you for a long time.” She padded forward and stretched out her head to sniff his flank. Tigerclaw tried not to flinch at the stench that came from her breath. “ShadowClan needs a fearless and powerful leader,” the old cat murmured. “You know you can give them everything they want, Tigerclaw. And after that . . . we will be waiting.”

She turned and started to walk away. “Stop!” cried Tigerclaw. “What do you mean, you’ll be waiting? I don’t even know who you are!”

The she-cat paused and looked back at him. “My name is Mapleshade,” she meowed. “I have walked beside you from the day you were born, guiding your paw steps, laying out your destiny before you. For now, you don’t need to know anything else. Much, much more lies ahead of us, Tigerclaw. Be patient, and you will find out everything.”

“Wait!” Tigerclaw tried to run after her, but the ferns tangled around his legs, and Mapleshade vanished into the undergrowth. With a start, he woke up, his fur still damp and carrying the scent of fungus and dying things.

“Ewww!” coughed Stumpytail, scrambling to the other side of the nest. “Did you roll in something bad yesterday?”

Tigerclaw stalked out of the den, ducking under the fallen trunk. “Don’t be ridiculous!” he hissed. “Come on, we need to get to the camp.”

Blackfoot bounded up beside him. “Has something happened? Did you have a dream from StarClan?”

Tigerclaw shook his head impatiently. “We just need to be there.”

He raced through the trees with Mapleshade’s words echoing in his ears: *ShadowClan needs a fearless and powerful leader. You can give them everything they want.* He heard the other cats panting and stumbling behind him, but he didn’t slow down until he reached the entrance to the camp. At once he heard a low, keening sound, many voices sharing one terrible note of grief.

Runningnose was standing in the middle of the clearing surrounded by cats huddled in misery. His tail dragged in the dirt, and he looked even older than he had the day before. He came to meet Tigerclaw and ushered him to the edge of the camp. “Nightstar died last night,” he murmured.

Tigerclaw lowered his head. “I am so sorry for your loss,” he mewed. “I hope he walks with StarClan now.”

Runningnose’s tail twitched. “Wherever Nightstar is, I hope he is at peace. The most important thing to do now is to keep the rest of my Clan safe.” He stared at Tigerclaw, his eyes huge and haunted. “My Clanmates are terrified of being leaderless. There is no deputy to take over from Nightstar, and StarClan has sent us no sign of what should happen next. How can I blame these cats if they feel that their ancestors have abandoned them?” His voice rose in a wail of horror. “What if we never recover from what Brokenstar did to us? The wounds run so deep, and nothing I can do will heal them.”

Tigerclaw let his tail rest on the old cat’s shoulder. “You must be strong,” he urged. “Without a leader, your Clanmates will look to you. StarClan hasn’t given up on ShadowClan; you mustn’t let yourself think that.” He hoped Runningnose took his quivering muscles as a sign of grief rather than of the excitement that was building inside him. *This is your moment!* Mapleshade hissed. *Tread carefully. You are stepping onto the thinnest ice, and you must not fall through.*

Tigerclaw squared his shoulders, as if he had reached a decision. “Runningnose, you must lead your Clan until StarClan makes its wishes known. And until that time, my cats and I will do everything we can to help you. I know your Clanmates have been doubly wounded, by Brokenstar and by the sickness from the rats. If you let me, I will help you heal them.”

Runningnose sniffed. “Thank you, Tigerclaw,” he mewed. “I knew I could rely on you.” He limped across the clearing to the lichen-covered rock and hauled himself onto it. “Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the rock!”

The earthen space began to fill with somber-eyed cats, swirling together like leaves in a stream. Tigerclaw saw Stumpytail go to sit beside Dawncloud, while Clawface laid the tip of his tail on Rowanberry’s back to guide her to an empty place.

“What did you say to Runningnose?” whispered Snag in Tigerclaw’s ear.

“That he and his Clanmates will have our utmost support until StarClan reveals their new leader.”

There was a flicker of surprise in Snag’s eyes. “That old cat, and this weak Clan, could need a great deal of support,” he commented.

Tigerclaw nodded. “Indeed. And we will be repaid for it, don’t worry.”

“Good,” mewed Snag.

“Clanmates!” Runningnose began from on top of the rock. “Shortly the elders will bring Nightstar’s body out from his den and we can begin our vigil. As we have no deputy to take his place, I will lead you until StarClan makes its wishes known. Even as we mourn Nightstar, life must continue. The worst of the sickness has passed, and we must make ourselves strong once more. Hunting and border patrols will be sent out as normal, and battle training will begin again.”

He was interrupted by a tumult of voices.

“We have only just gotten over the sickness! We need more time to recover!”

“How can we hunt, patrol the borders, and train our apprentices?”

“We want to serve our Clan, Runningnose, but you’re asking too much!”

Runningnose's eyes clouded with confusion, and he took a pace back from the edge of the rock.

Tigerclaw raised his head. "With your permission, cats of ShadowClan, I can help you. My cats and I have kept your fresh-kill pile well stocked for the past moon. Now you are strong enough to hunt for yourselves, so why not let us help with your border patrols, and take over your battle training?" He lowered his eyes and scraped at the ground with one forepaw. "If you wish, that is." *Don't overdo the humility, Tigerclaw*, warned Mapleshade. *It's not terribly convincing.*

Runningnose stepped forward again, blinking in gratitude. "Tigerclaw, we will take all the help we can get," he meowed.

"Wait," called Deerfoot. "ShadowClan has always survived on its own. Why should we let outsiders do everything for us now?"

Tigerclaw met Deerfoot's gaze. "That is not what I am proposing," he mewed. "We merely want to work alongside you, give you time to recover your full strength now that the danger of the sickness has gone." He looked around. "Cats of ShadowClan, never forget that you are surrounded by enemies who will attack the moment they think you have any trace of weakness. You were lucky to be left alone while the sickness was here. Can you keep it a secret forever? It only takes one sharp-eyed cat at a Gathering, one rumor across the border, for other Clans to put your strength to the test. ShadowClan has always been the most feared Clan in the forest. I promise I will not let that change!"

The pine trees shivered as the clearing erupted in yowls of triumph.

"He's right! We can't show weakness to the other Clans!"

"I'll train with you, Tigerclaw! Teach me everything you know!"

"ShadowClan will be feared once more!"

Tigerclaw closed his eyes and basked in the warmth of the cheers. *Remember this moment*, Mapleshade urged. *This is what power feels like.*

Chapter 8

Runningnose appeared at his side. “Please organize the battle training as you see fit.” He gave a slightly embarrassed purr. “Not my area of expertise at all!”

“No problem,” Tigerclaw meowed. He flicked his tail. “Blackfoot, Snag, Mowgli? I want each of you to take a warrior and an apprentice. Go through the basic attack and defense moves, then we’ll join up for a mock battle later on. Okay?”

His companions nodded. Stumpytail pricked his ears. “What about me?”

“You, Clawface, and Tangleburr can lead hunting patrols,” Tigerclaw ordered.

There was a faint cough behind him. “We can arrange our own hunting patrols, Tigerclaw,” Deerfoot meowed. His voice was mild but his eyes gleamed with an unspoken challenge.

Tigerclaw bowed his head. “Of course, Deerfoot. I only meant that my cats can help you with restocking the fresh-kill pile.”

Deerfoot blinked. Tigerclaw sensed that the warrior was going to question him at every turn, and he felt his claws slide out to grip the soil. *Be patient*, whispered Mapleshade. *There will be time to deal with him later.* Turning away, Tigerclaw nodded to Flintfang and Tallpoppy. “You two come with me.”

Tallpoppy twitched her ears. “We don’t need battle training,” she pointed out. “We have been warriors longer than you, Tigerclaw!” She sounded amused, as if she was speaking to an impudent kit.

Tigerclaw let the fur rise along his spine. “Runningnose said that I was in charge of battle training,” he meowed quietly. “I can’t do that unless I know the abilities of every warrior in the Clan.”

Tallpoppy blinked. “I don’t think Runningnose meant it quite like that.”

Tigerclaw took one step closer to her. “Really? Would you like to discuss it with him—or do you think he has enough to do already?” He flicked his tail toward the center of the clearing, where Runningnose was helping the elders to drag Nightstar’s crumpled body out of the leader’s den.

Tallpoppy looked down at her paws. “I won’t disturb him now,” she meowed. “Flintfang and I will show you how ShadowClan warriors are trained to fight.”

Tigerclaw led them to a sandy space among the pines not far from the lake. The forest echoed with the sound of cats striking, pouncing, and retreating as Blackfoot, Snag, and Mowgli tested the rest of the Clan. Tigerclaw stood back and waited for Flintfang and Tallpoppy to demonstrate the established ShadowClan battle moves. He recognized several of them: the stealthy approach, the leap with raised forepaws, the hind leg slice that unbalanced opponents as well as left their back paws bleeding and lame.

“Wait!” Tigerclaw called as Tallpoppy folded gracefully onto the ground after a swift strike from Flintfang. Tigerclaw went over and narrowed his eyes at the brown she-cat. “Why did you roll over so fast? Even if you get knocked over, you still have a chance to grab your opponent with your teeth or claws. If you do this to a smaller cat, or can catch a bigger one off balance, you’ll bring them down too.”

“I’m sure Tallpoppy would do that in the heat of battle,” Flintfang puffed, licking the ruffled fur on his chest. “But we have our claws sheathed now!”

Tigerclaw glared at him. “And how will that help when it comes to a real fight? Unsheathe your claws, both of you, and start taking this seriously. If there’s a danger you might get hurt, you’ll both sharpen up your moves.”

Tallpoppy's eyes widened. "That's how Brokenstar made us train," she mewed. "This is a practice, Tigerclaw, not the real thing. Why risk getting injured when we are at peace?"

"If you're as good at fighting as you say you are, you won't get hurt," Tigerclaw growled. "Now, try that hind leg slice again, Flintfang, and give Tallpoppy something real to avoid."

Flintfang launched himself at Tallpoppy again, and this time Tigerclaw could see his claws glinting amid the thick gray fur on his paws. But Flintfang retracted them a heartbeat before he lashed out at Tallpoppy's hind legs, and once again she dropped to the ground without being touched. Tigerclaw shouldered Flintfang out of the way. "Let me try," he ordered.

He waited until Tallpoppy was standing, then rushed her, unsheathing his claws and aiming for the soft part of her hind leg just above her paw. Tallpoppy screeched and flung herself away from him. Tigerclaw stopped and looked down at her as she twisted her head around to lick her bleeding leg. "You'll react quicker next time, won't you?" he challenged. Tallpoppy didn't look at him; she just nodded and kept swiping at her torn fur.

"I don't think that was necessary," Flintfang began, but Tigerclaw silenced him with a flick of his tail.

"Let's get back to the camp," he meowed. "The hunting patrols should have returned by now."

Stumpytail and Clawface had done an impressive job of stocking the fresh-kill pile. The cats swarmed around it, keeping their voices low out of respect for Nightstar but unable to hide their delight at such a good haul. Tigerclaw stepped forward just as Oakpaw was about to drag a shrew from the pile.

"I want to say something," Tigerclaw announced. All around him, the cats fell silent. Tigerclaw gestured to the fresh-kill pile. "Every bite we take tonight is dedicated to the memory of Nightstar. ShadowClan has lost a noble leader, and my companions and I are honored to share your grief." He bowed his head in a show of respect. In his mind, Mapleshade let out a rasp of laughter. *Nightstar was weaker than a newborn kit. Don't think these warriors didn't know that.*

"Thank you, Tigerclaw," mewed Runningnose. His voice cracked. "We are honored to have you here—you and all your companions." He stood a little straighter. "On behalf of my Clanmates, I would like to invite you to move into the camp. You have proven your loyalty to ShadowClan many times over, and it's what Nightstar would have wanted. You belong here now, not outside our borders."

Tigerclaw blinked. He had not expected this so soon, and he could tell by the startled whispers that Runningnose didn't speak on behalf of *all* his Clanmates. Should he make Runningnose wait a little longer, until the whole Clan was desperate for Tigerclaw to join them permanently? *You can win them over more quickly if you're among them all the time,* Mapleshade pointed out. Tigerclaw waited for one more heartbeat, then bowed his head. "You are very generous, Runningnose. If you are sure that this is what Nightstar would want, then we accept." He lifted his head, daring the ShadowClan warriors to challenge something their leader seemed to approve through the words of his medicine cat.

Rowanberry stepped forward. "Welcome to ShadowClan, Tigerclaw." She glanced fondly at Clawface. "And to those of you who have lived among us before, welcome home."

There was a murmur of approval from some of the warriors, and Stumpytail and Dawncloud touched noses. Snag and Mowgli stood at the edge of the crowd, looking wary.

Tigerclaw raised his tail. "Runningnose, I have a great favor to ask. Please may I give my friends Snag and Mowgli warrior names? Only then will they feel as if this is truly their home. I am sure Nightstar would want the same."

Runningnose nodded. "Of course, Tigerclaw. Please, go ahead and choose their names."

Tigerclaw glanced around at the watching cats. "Only if your Clanmates agree," he meowed. "After all, a naming ceremony should be performed by a leader. I don't want to offend anyone."

"I'm sure we'll cope, Tigerclaw," meowed Fernshade drily.

"We don't want the other Clans asking questions at the Gathering about where these cats came from," Wetfoot agreed.

Tigerclaw jumped onto the rock, ignoring the ripple of surprise from the ShadowClan warriors. "Snag, Mowgli, come here, please." The massive ginger tom and the sleek brown cat padded forward until they were standing below him. Tigerclaw took a deep breath. "Snag, Mowgli, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

The two cats bowed their heads.

"I do, Tigerclaw."

"I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names. Snag, from this moment on you will be known as Jaggedtooth. StarClan honors your strength and your fighting skills, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan." Tigerclaw reached down and rested his muzzle briefly on the broad orange head. Then he turned to the brown tom. "Mowgli, from this moment on you will be known as Nightwhisper. StarClan honors your stealth and your courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan." Tigerclaw touched his head, and stepped back. "Clanmates, I give you Jaggedtooth and Nightwhisper!"

"Jaggedtooth! Nightwhisper!" cheered Stumpytail and Blackfoot. Other ShadowClan cats joined in, and the newly named warriors lifted their heads proudly.

“That’s not fair! They didn’t have to do any training!” grumbled a small voice from the back. Tigerclaw sought out Oakpaw and fixed him with a cold glare; the apprentice ducked his head and said nothing more.

Tigerclaw jumped down from the rock. “And now, Clanmates, we will honor our fallen leader Nightstar with the vigil that he deserves. Come, join me as we pay tribute to him.” He padded across to the small black shape that had tried so hard to give strength and leadership to ShadowClan after the defeat of Brokenstar. *How did you ever think you would succeed in following him?* Tigerclaw thought scornfully as he crouched by Nightstar’s head. He closed his eyes, listening as the rest of ShadowClan settled around him, pressing their muzzles against the cold, dusk-damp fur.

This Clan belongs to me now, Nightstar. Watch how I make it strong again, feared and respected throughout all the forest.

Chapter 9

“Tigerclaw, wake up!”

Tigerclaw stretched and opened his eyes, briefly confused by the tangle of brambles overhead instead of a smooth gray trunk. Then he remembered: He was in the ShadowClan camp now, not hiding in the wild woods like some kind of rogue. He rolled over, feeling the familiar glow of satisfaction. He and his companions had been in the camp for a quarter moon, leading their Clanmates in battle training, joining hunting and border patrols, constantly reassuring Runningnose that StarClan would choose a new leader soon. . . .

“Tigerclaw, you have to come see this!”

Tigerclaw sat up and looked at Clawface. “What is it?” he grumbled. “I’m not on the dawn patrol today.”

“I know, I’ve just returned with it. But something is happening on the other side of the Thunderpath. The forest is on fire!”

Tigerclaw leaped out of his nest and thrust past Clawface. Behind him, the scrawny brown warrior called, “It looked like the flames were right above the ThunderClan camp!”

Tigerclaw pounded through the thorns and raced through the pine trees, ignoring the brambles that snagged at his pelt. Nightwhisper was standing beside the Thunderpath, straining to see through the trees on the other side. A terrible roaring, crackling sound echoed from ThunderClan territory, and the air was acrid with pale gray smoke. Glimpses of bright orange flames flickered among the trunks, and every so often the distant rumble was splintered by the sound of a tree crashing to the ground. Tigerclaw crouched at the edge of the Thunderpath and scanned for monsters.

“Are you going over there?” Nightwhisper yowled over the noise of the burning trees. “Do you want me to come with you? There might be cats who need our help.”

Tigerclaw shook his head. “I’m not going on a rescue mission,” he growled. “I just need to see what’s going on. Stay here; I want to do this alone.”

Nightwhisper shifted his weight onto his front paws as Tigerclaw began to cross, as if he was about to follow. Tigerclaw glared over his shoulder at him. “I said, stay here!” He bounded across the rest of the hard black stone and plunged into the long, cool grass.

At once the scents of ThunderClan bathed his nose, cutting through the smell of cinders. Tigerclaw breathed in deeply, then burst out coughing as sharp smoke pricked the back of his throat. He ducked his head and pushed through the grass into the trees. The leaf-mulch beneath his paws was instantly familiar, and he quickly found his way to an almost invisible trail that led deeper into the woods, toward the ravine. The crackling of the flames grew louder, and Tigerclaw felt his fur grow hot as he neared the camp. As far as he could tell, the trees between the ravine and Twolegplace were burning, and the deafening roar suggested that the fire was heading straight toward the ThunderClan camp. *No!*

This is the Clan that drove you out! Forced you to live as a rogue, turned you away in favor of a kittypet! Mapleshade’s voice snarled in his ear.

Tigerclaw curled his lip. *Don’t mistake this for caring about my former Clanmates. I want the satisfaction of destroying them myself, not watching them burn like trapped rabbits, that’s all.* He wondered if Mapleshade could sense the horror that squirmed in his belly. No cat deserved to die in flames, surely?

He winced as Twoleg shouts rang out close to his ear, and giant figures, muffled by thick dark pelts, crashed through the undergrowth. A two-tone howl sounded from the Thunderpath, and something long and heavy was dragged past him, hissing over the crumpled bracken. Tigerclaw bounded in the other direction, weaving through the oaks and beech trees until the ground fell away steeply into the crevice that had been his home for so many moons. Smoke billowed over the ravine, and flames already licked at the brambles on the far side. Shrieks and yowls of terrified cats cut through the noise of the fire. Tigerclaw crept to the edge of the cliff and peered over.

Frostfur's white pelt gleamed through the smoke as he nudged Bluestar up the path that led out of the camp. The leader stumbled along at a half run, caught up among her fleeing Clanmates.

"Head for the river!" called a voice from below. Tigerclaw felt his muscles tense. Fireheart was in charge, of course. Surely that mouse-brained ThunderClan leader hadn't made him *deputy*? "Keep an eye on your denmates," Fireheart ordered. "Don't lose sight of one another."

That should be me down there, Tigerclaw thought furiously. *I should be saving my Clanmates, not some kittypet!*

Now Fireheart was handing Willowpelt's kits to Longtail and Mousefur, telling them to stay close to the queen, who was carrying the third kit. Tigerclaw scanned the cats for a pale ginger pelt and let out a growl of relief. Goldenflower was at the top of the ravine, racing toward the river. A tiny pale brown shape ran at her heels: Tawnykit had made it out.

Fireheart followed the cats to the top of the slope and paused. "Wait! Is any cat missing?"

Cloudpaw's fluffy white head popped up. He looked as much like a kittypet as ever. "Where are Halftail and Patchpelt?" he squeaked.

"They're not with me," Smallear called from farther along the path.

"They must still be in camp!" meowed Whitestorm. Tigerclaw shrugged. If elders couldn't manage to save themselves, they were a waste of fresh-kill.

"Where's Bramblekit?" Goldenflower shrieked, and Tigerclaw felt the blood chill in his veins. *Bramblekit!* "He was behind me when I was climbing the ravine!" the queen wailed.

"I'll find them," Fireheart meowed. "It's too dangerous for you to stay here any longer. Whitestorm and Darkstripe, make sure the rest of the Clan make it to the river."

"You can't go back down there!" Sandstorm yowled.

"I have to," Fireheart insisted. *Yes, play the hero, run into fire to show just what a loyal little warrior you are.* Tigerclaw sank his claws into the dusty soil. *Where is Bramblekit?*

"I'm coming too," Sandstorm mewed.

"No!" Whitestorm told her. "We are short of warriors already. We need you to help get the Clan to the river."

"Then I'll come!" Tigerclaw blinked as Cinderpelt staggered back to the edge of the ravine. The pale gray medicine cat looked exhausted, her eyes streaming from the smoke. "I'm no warrior," Cinderpelt mewed. "I'd be no use anyway if we met an enemy patrol."

"No way!" Fireheart hissed.

Then Yellowfang lurched over to them. "I may be old, but I'm steadier on my paws than you," mewed the old medicine cat to Cinderpelt. "The Clan will need your healing skills. I'll go with Fireheart. You stay with the Clan."

Tigerclaw stared in disbelief. Was the life of his son dependent on an ancient medicine cat and an arrogant kittypet?

Cinderpelt looked as if she was going to say something, but Fireheart cut her off. "There's no time to argue. Yellowfang, come with me. The rest of you, head for the river.” He turned and ran back down the path with Yellowfang lumbering behind him.

Tigerclaw peered through the smoke, searching desperately for a small dark brown shape. Flames were devouring the ferns around the camp and twining around the slender tree trunks. Two filthy, blurred shapes were just visible at the foot of a birch. Yellowfang rushed forward and grabbed the closest body—Tigerclaw was pretty sure it was Halftail—and started to drag it across the clearing. Fireheart hauled Patchpelt through the gorse tunnel first and managed to get the old tom to the top of the cliff. Yellowfang and Halftail were much slower, and the trees around them exploded in fire before they were halfway up the slope.

“Help! Help!”

Tigerclaw whipped his head around and stared in horror at the tiny cat clinging to the branch of a tree that sprouted from the side of the ravine. “Bramblekit!” he roared. The bark just below his son was smoldering, and in the next heartbeat the whole trunk was ablaze. Tigerclaw was about to launch himself off the top of the cliff when there was a blur of movement and a soot-stained shape raced up the tree.

“Fireheart, help me!” As Bramblekit screamed, he let go of the branch and dropped toward the ground. Tigerclaw watched, unable to breathe, as Fireheart managed to catch the kit in his mouth. There was no way they would make it down the trunk now. Fireheart began to creep along the branch, still carrying Bramblekit. Every hair on Tigerclaw’s pelt stood on end, urging him to fly through the air and somehow rescue his son. But his weight would only bring the branch crashing down into the flames. He had to let Fireheart do this alone.

The flames leaped up to reach the branch and there was a terrible crack. The branch started to fall, but Fireheart somehow managed to jump clear at the last moment and grasp the side of the ravine. Bramblekit lurched, and Tigerclaw braced himself to plunge down into the river of fire, but Fireheart kept hold of the tiny cat and began to claw his way to the top of the cliff. Below him, the burning tree filled the ravine with flames, blocking any sight of Yellowfang and Halftail.

Tigerclaw realized he was trembling. *Thank you, StarClan, for sparing my son.* He drew back into the ferns and glowered at Fireheart, who had made it to the rest of his Clanmates and was being fawned over like he had saved the entire forest on his own. *You may have saved my son, but this changes nothing*, Tigerclaw growled under his breath. *I will still kill you when I have the chance.*

CHAPTER 10

“Don’t lie there like a dead pigeon! Go for his hind legs!” Tigerclaw hissed. Oakpaw was sprawled on his back, felled by a blow from an apprentice named Rowanpaw. The lithe ginger tom danced out of the way, purring.

“Too slow, Oakpaw!” he taunted.

Tigerclaw lashed his tail. “Are you going to let your enemy speak to you like that?” he challenged Oakpaw.

The pale brown cat scrambled to his feet. “No way!” He launched himself at Rowanpaw, paws flailing. Rowanpaw fell back with a grunt, and Tigerclaw noted with satisfaction that Oakpaw had unsheathed his claws and drawn blood. Slowly, slowly, these ShadowClan cats were learning.

“Is Rowanpaw hurt?” mewed a worried voice behind him. Tigerclaw turned to see Runningnose emerging from a clump of bracken, his nose moist as usual, and his eyes cloudy with concern.

“He’s fine,” Tigerclaw meowed. “He’ll move quicker next time, that’s all.”

Runningnose nodded. “I trust you to train these apprentices to fight in any battle, Tigerclaw,” he murmured. “No cat could doubt your loyalty to our Clan.”

Not for a moment, Tigerclaw thought. When he had returned from watching ThunderClan burn, he had let the ShadowClan cats believe that his shocked look was due to his fear that the flames would cross the Thunderpath. Tigerclaw had insisted on patrolling that border alone all day, watching long hollow snakes spurt water onto the burning trees while Twolegs scurried about, yelping. Even after three sunrises, the woods still smelled of smoke, and blackened, charred trunks could be seen deep in ThunderClan territory. Tigerclaw wondered if Bluestar had brought her cats back to the ravine yet. All of the dens would need rebuilding, and prey would be scarce, driven off or killed by the flames.

“I wondered if I could have a word?” Runningnose mewed beside him, jerking him out of his thoughts.

“Of course.” Tigerclaw checked that Oakpaw and Rowanpaw weren’t actually killing each other, then led the medicine cat away from the training area into a circle of hawthorns. “Is something wrong?”

Runningnose blinked. “The full moon is coming. How can ShadowClan go to the Gathering when we have no leader, no deputy?” He scraped at the ground. “But if we don’t go, every other Clan will know that something is wrong. Perhaps I should just ask StarClan to send clouds to cover the moon!” He strained to sound lighthearted, but Tigerclaw could smell fear coming from the old cat’s ruffled pelt.

“Has StarClan sent you any omens about who should lead ShadowClan?” he asked, trying to keep his voice mild. Inside, something stirred, a feeling of hunger, the certainty that everything he wanted was drawing closer.

Runningnose shook his head. “Nothing,” he mewed. “But perhaps I’ve been too busy, or too tired, to see the signs. My Clan is on the brink of destruction, and it could be my fault!”

Tigerclaw rested his tail on the old cat’s shoulder. “Look around you,” he urged. “ShadowClan is not on the brink of destruction! Your Clan is full of strong, able warriors. You know in your heart which one will make the best leader.” He stepped away from Runningnose, studied him carefully. “You alone know the signs that StarClan might send. Your ancestors trust you enough to be their voice in ShadowClan. You can help them choose the next leader.”

Runningnose’s head jerked up. “Are you saying that I should fake a sign? I couldn’t do that!”

“Of course not,” Tigerclaw soothed. “But surely any choice that the medicine cat makes is guided by StarClan, whether he knows it or not?”

Runningnose looked troubled. “You mean, StarClan would ensure that I made the same decision as it would?”

Tigerclaw nodded. “Think about it, Runningnose. There are still several days before the Gathering. Keep watch for signs from your ancestors—but also listen to the voice inside your own mind.”

Ha! purred Mapleshade.

Runningnose pushed his way out of the hawthorns, his eyes still troubled. Almost at once the branches on the other side of the little clearing rustled and Jaggedtooth emerged.

“He should choose you, if he has any sense,” the ginger tom meowed. “Why didn’t you tell him that, and help him make the decision?”

Tigerclaw blinked. “I cannot determine the will of StarClan.”

Jaggedtooth’s eyes glittered. “I don’t share your faith in dead cats,” he mewed. “Perhaps that makes things easier?”

Tigerclaw held his gaze and gave him a tiny nod. “You’ve been a good friend to me, Jaggedtooth. I won’t ever forget that.”

Jaggedtooth nodded back. “I know,” he mewed.

The sky above the pines was as dark as the water in the marshes, but the trees glowed silver in the light of a swollen moon.

“Tomorrow is the night of the Gathering,” Tigerclaw heard Fernshade whisper to Rowanberry. “Has Runningnose told you what he’s going to tell the other Clans?”

“I don’t think he’ll need to tell them anything,” Russetfur put in. “It’s going to be pretty obvious that Nightstar has died and we don’t have a leader.”

“Or a deputy,” added Applefur. “The other Clans will laugh us out of Fourtrees.”

“Be patient,” urged a quiet voice. Tangleburr had joined them. “There is still time for StarClan to answer our prayers.”

There was a stir of movement outside the medicine den, and Runningnose appeared, his gray-and-white pelt lit up by the moonlight. He crossed to the rock and hauled himself onto it. “Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a meeting!” he called, his thin voice echoing through the trees.

Tigerclaw unfolded himself from the shadows and joined the others as they sat at the foot of the rock. Runningnose looked no bigger or stronger than a kit, and Tigerclaw marveled at the way his Clanmates gazed at him with such respect, such trust that he would restore their Clan to how it should be.

“Clanmates, I know you are troubled about the Gathering,” Runningnose began. “I share your fears, but be strong! Have faith in our warrior ancestors to send us a new leader soon!”

There was a murmur from the watching cats, and Deerfoot stood up. “Soon isn’t now!” he hissed. “The Gathering is tomorrow! Does StarClan want us to look weak and leaderless in front of the other Clans?”

“Has StarClan given up on us?” wailed Rowanpaw. He was hushed by Stumpytail, who clouted him gently with one paw.

“Of course they haven’t given up on us,” Runningnose mewed, but his words were drowned by his Clanmates’ increasingly noisy protests.

“We’ll be pounced on like rats as soon as the Clans hear about Nightstar’s death!” yowled Ratscar.

“How can we survive without a leader?” snarled Tallpoppy. “No other Clan has ever turned up at a Gathering without one!”

Runningnose hung his head and said nothing. Tigerclaw could smell the misery coming from him. *Don’t give up now*, he urged. *There is still something you can do.*

Suddenly the medicine cat tensed. His ears pricked, and his gaze fixed on something at the foot of the rock. There was a tiny, pale glint among the grass, dappled in the moonlight. Runningnose jumped down and put his muzzle close to it. Then his head shot up in astonishment.

“It’s a claw!” he gasped. “Here, at the bottom of the rock. Has any cat lost a claw today?”

Warriors and apprentices shook their heads, and puzzled murmurs spread through the Clan.

Runningnose was studying the claw again. He reached out carefully and touched it with his paw, shifting it so that the other cats could see it. “Look,” he whispered. “The moon has cast shadows on it. Not shadows, *stripes*.” He looked up and stared at Tigerclaw. “Stripes like a tiger’s pelt.”

“It’s a sign!” gasped Dawncloud. “It must be!”

“StarClan has chosen our new leader!” called Blackfoot.

“Tigerclaw!” breathed Runningnose, and as one the cats of ShadowClan turned to gaze at Tigerclaw. “StarClan has spoken,” the medicine cat mewed. “And we must listen.”

Tigerclaw felt the breath catch in his chest. After all this time, the ancestors had chosen him! He had served them for so long, tried to challenge the weak leadership in ThunderClan, been driven out and forced to prove his loyalty to a new Clan. And now at last StarClan was rewarding him with a leadership of his own. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Tigerclaw closed his eyes and sensed the ranks of shadowed cats swell around him. Like a dark wave they surged through the forest, carrying him along on legs that seemed weightless. He felt a yowl of joy rise inside him as he raced into battle with his Clanmates. “Follow my lead!” he called, and countless warriors fell in behind him, matching their stride to his. Ahead, their enemy quivered with fear. . . .

“Tigerclaw?” Blackfoot mewed quietly. “Runningnose wants to speak with you.”

Tigerclaw blinked open his eyes. The medicine cat was standing in front of him, close enough for Tigerclaw to smell his rancid breath.

Runningnose bowed low. “Will you do us the honor of leading us, Tigerclaw? StarClan has spoken, and it has chosen you.”

We did it! screeched Mapleshade inside his head. *Didn’t I promise you this would happen?*

“And we choose you, too!” yowled Boulder over the heads of his Clanmates. “You have led us out of the darkness after Nightstar’s death, and shown us how to be strong again!”

Tigerclaw dipped his head. “I am stunned by the decision of our ancestors,” he meowed. “I came late to ShadowClan, though I hope no cat would question my loyalty to each one of you. I never looked for this. If you’re sure, and if StarClan has spoken, then I can only say *yes*.”

“Hail the new ShadowClan leader!” called Runningnose, and the night air was split with screeches of joy and relief.

There was a faint rustle in the brambles behind Tigerclaw. He turned and saw a pair of amber eyes gleaming. Jaggedtooth limped forward, bleeding from one toe where the claw had been ripped out. Tigerclaw glanced down at the injury. “You took a big risk that it would work,” he murmured.

Jaggedtooth lashed his tail. “It paid off,” he growled. “You can thank me later.”

Tigerclaw turned and padded to the center of the clearing. The other cats fell silent as he sprang onto the rock. Tigerclaw settled his paws on the cold, smooth stone and looked down at his Clanmates: Nightwhisper and Jaggedtooth, former strays who would be loyal to him until their last breath; Runningnose and Littlecloud, *his* medicine cats, watching for signs that StarClan sent to their leader; strong warriors, healthy queens, and apprentices desperate to learn how to fight as bravely as he did. He caught

Blackfoot’s eye; he would make him deputy before the moon rose above the treetops. Not Jaggedtooth, who needed to understand that Tigerclaw owed him nothing.

Tigerclaw braced his shoulders. He should prepare for the Gathering, when Bluestar would be forced to face him as her equal, at the head of a Clan that could match hers any day.

But that was tomorrow. For now, Tigerclaw was content to listen to his Clanmates calling his new name.

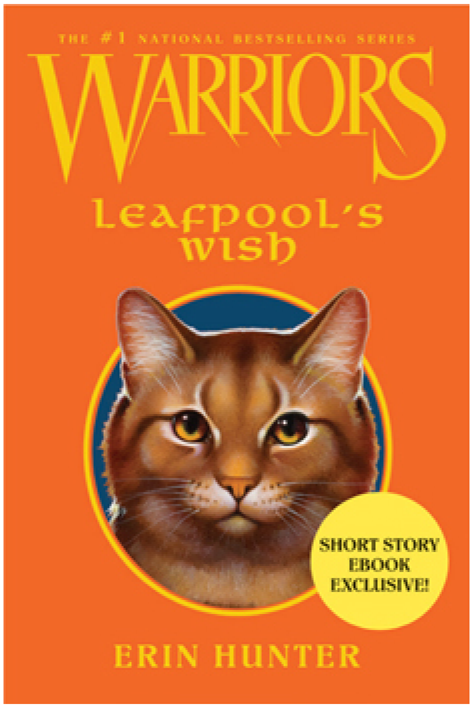
Tigerstar! Tigerstar!

KEEP READING FOR A PEEK AT

DAWN OF THE CLANS

WARRIORS

LEAFPOOL'S WISH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Chapter One

"Keep still, Birchpaw! If you don't stop wriggling, I'll have Dustpelt sit on you!" Leafpool retrieved the fallen moss with a hiss and held it over the apprentice's eye once more.

"It stings!" Birchpaw protested.

"What, worse than a badger's claws?" Leafpool meowed skeptically. She squeezed the moss between her pads and a bead of green juice dropped into the centre of Birchpaw's half-closed eye. Birchpaw winced but Leafpool quickly placed her paw on top of his eye, keeping it closed while the juice treated the infection.

Memories of the badger attack flooded back to her: the sight of her Clanmates battling for their lives while she and Crowfeather stood, horrorstruck, at the entrance to the hollow; the sound of small furred bodies thudding into the ground, tossed by gigantic black-and-white paws; the snarls and snapping jaws of the badgers rumbling beneath the shrieks of the cats. Birchpaw had been lucky to escape with nothing more serious than a clawed eye. Sootfur had been killed, and so had Cinderpelt the medicine cat, desperately protecting Sorreltail as she gave birth to her kits. Leafpool felt a fresh wave of grief, sharp as ever, when she thought of her mentor dying without her. Cinderpelt must have been terrified for the future of ThunderClan without a medicine cat, yet she still refused to leave Sorreltail's side.

I came back, Cinderpelt, and I stayed, Leafpool whispered fiercely, hoping that her mentor could hear her in StarClan.

"Talking to yourself, eh?" Brackenfur mewed, appearing in the entrance to the den.

Leafpool shook the memories clear from her mind. "Just remembering something important," she replied. "Is everything okay, Brackenfur?”

“Er, can I go now?” Birchpaw chirped, looking up at her with his injured eye closed and weeping with juice.

Leafpool nodded. “Of course, but you’re still not allowed out of the hollow! I don’t want any brambles poking you in that eye before it’s fully healed.”

Birchpaw trotted out, muttering under his breath. Brackenfur flicked the apprentice with his tail tip as he passed. “Some cats need to remember how lucky they were to survive that battle,” he grunted.

Leafpool bowed her head. “And those who fell will not be forgotten.”

Brackenfur ducked to enter the den. Like most of Leafpool’s Clanmates, he glanced nervously up at the roof as if he was wondering how the weight of the cliffs above them was supported. “Sorreltail sent me,” he meowed. “Cinderkit’s picked up a couple of fleas and she wondered if you had anything that might soothe the bites.”

Leafpool pictured the tiny gray she-cat scratching at her fluffy pelt. “I’m sure I can help,” she purred. “Tell Sorreltail I’ll bring something over before sunhigh.”

Brackenfur narrowed his eyes. “There’s no rush. You look tired, Leafpool. Is there anything I can do?”

Leafpool shook her head. “I’m fine. I’m always busy after a battle, and a nursery full of kits doesn’t help!” She paused. “Not that I don’t rejoice at every new kit born to ThunderClan,” she added. “They are all precious.”

Brackenfur’s gaze softened. “They are indeed.” He padded out of the den and Leafpool followed him as far as the entrance, where she stood in a shaft of watery sunlight. On the opposite side of the clearing, her sister, Squirrelflight, was sharing a mouse with Brambleclaw, her dark ginger body curled into his. Leafpool felt a twist of concern in her belly. It looked like Squirrelflight had finally made her choice between their Clanmate Ashfur and the broad-shouldered dark tabby. Leafpool wouldn’t miss the tension between the warriors while Squirrelflight had been making up her mind, but she wished with all her heart that her sister had chosen differently. How could Leafpool tell her that she had dreamed of the Dark Forest and seen Tigerstar mentoring Brambleclaw in secret, training his son in the most terrible ways to kill and maim an enemy? However often Leafpool told herself that Brambleclaw was a loyal ThunderClan warrior, no cat could deny that his father was one of the most dangerous cats ever to live in the Clans.

And yet there had been the vision of stars over the lake, when Leafpool had been walking alone one sunset. Two starry shapes, unmistakeably Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw, padding side by side across the sky, tails entwined. What could that mean except that these two warriors were destined to be together? Reluctantly, Leafpool had told her sister what she had seen; it was not the duty of a medicine cat to choose which omens and visions to keep secret. Leafpool had to accept that this had helped Squirrelflight decide between Brambleclaw and Ashfur. And when she treated Brambleclaw for injuries that could only have come from fighting in his dreams with his Dark Forest father, she said nothing to her sister. She had to hope that Brambleclaw would make his own decision to leave his connection with Tigerstar behind, and learn only from what his living Clanmates could teach him.

Cinderkit’s flea bites were easily treated with some soothing marigold leaves rubbed into her cobweb-soft fur. The tiny cat squirmed so much that Leafpool suspected her littermates would receive a good dose as well. Sorreltail blinked gratefully at her, happily worn out by nursing and keeping her little family in order. Leafpool breathed in the sweet, milky scent of the nursery and let it comfort her for a moment. She held on to the memory of it as she settled into her nest that night. The den still seemed empty without Cinderpelt sleeping beside her, the shadows cold and thick against the rough stone walls. Leafpool tucked her nose under her tail and took a deep breath. Tonight she wanted to walk in the Dark Forest again. She had to know if Brambleclaw was still being mentored by his father.

She woke in a dense green forest, dimly lit by an unseen moon and stirred by a whispering breeze. She felt the familiar shudder of horror at the thought of dead cats unwanted by StarClan hiding in the bushes, watching her with angry yellow eyes. But she forced herself to walk along the narrow path that curved between the mossy trunks, convinced she could hear her heartbeat echoing among the trees.

Suddenly Leafpool stopped, feeling her heart beat faster. Three cats stood a little way ahead with their backs to her. She recognized two of them at once—but these weren't Dark Forest warriors. Their fur glittered with starlight, and silver beams pooled around their paws as if they were standing in water. One of them turned to face Leafpool, and she felt her heart lift with joy. *Bluestar!*

"Come out, Leafpool," she meowed. "We've been waiting for you."

Leafpool walked forward until she could smell the scent of wind and stars on the old leader's pelt.

"You took your time," grunted Yellowfang.

Leafpool didn't know the third cat, a broad-shouldered golden tabby. He dipped his head to her. "Greetings, Leafpool. My name is Lionheart. I was with Bluestar when your father, Firestar, first came to the forest."

"I'm honored to meet you," Leafpool meowed. "But where am I? Why have you brought me here?" She hadn't dreamed of this place before, yet it couldn't be the Dark Forest, not if StarClan cats were here.

"Come," Bluestar ordered, turning to follow the path deeper into the forest.

It led to a moonlit clearing, and the trees that had seemed so sinister before now looked graceful and welcoming, filled with the scents of prey. In the clear sky, three tiny stars gleamed more brightly than the others, throbbing with silver light.

“Bluestar, what’s that?” Leafpool whispered.

Bluestar didn’t reply. Instead, she walked into the center of the clearing and gestured with her tail for Leafpool to sit. Leafpool looked up once more, but the three stars had vanished.

“Do you have a sign for me?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” Bluestar answered. “But we wanted to tell you that the path of your life will twist in ways yet hidden to you.”

“Yes.” Yellowfang sounded tense, as if there was more she wanted to say but some unspoken promise prevented her. “You will tread a path that few medicine cats have trodden before you.”

Leafpool felt a stab of alarm. “What do you mean?”

“There are cats you have yet to meet,” Bluestar meowed. “And their paws will shape your future.”

What does that mean? Leafpool wanted to demand a clearer answer but she knew better than to challenge StarClan warriors.

Lionheart rested his tail on her shoulder and his scent drifted around her, brave and reassuring. “We have come to give you strength,” he murmured.

“Whatever happens, remember that we are always with you,” Bluestar mewed.

Her blue eyes glittered with concern and kindness, but Leafpool still had no idea what any of this meant. Her life was set in stone now, like her den beneath the cliffs. She would be ThunderClan’s medicine cat until it was her turn to walk with these cats in StarClan. What she had with Crowfeather was over, forgotten. It was a part of her life that would fade in time to nothing.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Can’t you tell me more?”

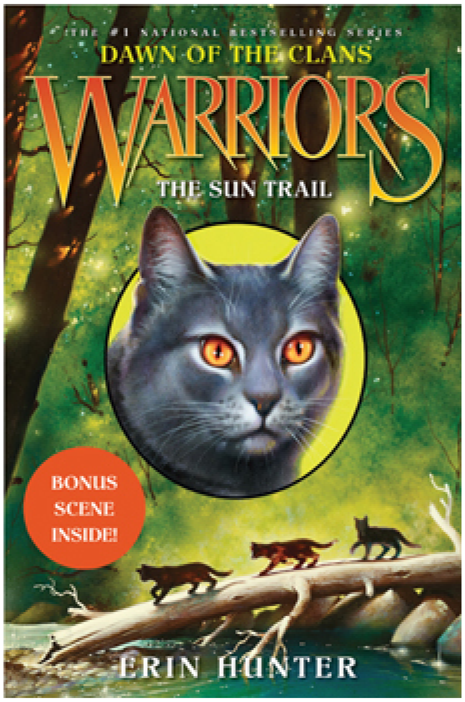
Bluestar shook her head. “Even StarClan can’t see everything that will happen. The path ahead of you vanishes into shadow—but we will walk with you every paw step of the way, I promise.”

Leafpool let herself be comforted by Bluestar’s words. If StarClan walked alongside her, nothing terrible could happen. When she had left her Clan to be with Crowfeather, she had felt as if her ancestors had abandoned her forever. But she had followed her heart back to ThunderClan, and now they were beside her again, protecting her, guiding her, keeping her safe.

I made the right decision—no, the only *decision—when I came back to the hollow. Nothing will threaten my place in ThunderClan again.*

KEEP READING FOR A PEEK AT

DAWN OF THE CLANS
WARRIORS
BOOK 1:
THE SUN TRAIL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PROLOGUE

Cold gray light rippled over the floor of a cave so vast that its roof was lost in shadows. An endless screen of water fell across the entrance, its sound echoing from the rocks.

Near the back of the cavern crouched a frail white she-cat. Despite her age, her green eyes were clear and deep with wisdom as her gaze traveled over the skinny cats swarming the cave floor, restlessly pacing in front of the shimmering waterfall: the elders huddled together in the sleeping hollows; the kits mewling desperately, demanding food from their exhausted mothers.

"We can't go on like this," the old she-cat whispered to herself.

A few tail-lengths away, several kits squabbled over an eagle carcass. Its flesh had been stripped away the day before as soon as their mothers had caught it. A big ginger kit shouldered a smaller tabby away from the bone she was gnawing at.

"I *need* this!" he announced.

The tabby sprang up and nipped the end of the ginger kit's tail. "We *all* need it, flea-brain!" she snapped as the ginger tom let out a yowl.

A gray-and-white elder, every one of her ribs showing through her pelt, tottered up to the kits and snatched the bone away.

"Hey!" the ginger kit protested.

The elder glared at him. "I caught prey for season after season," she snarled. "Don't you think I deserve one measly bone?" She turned and stalked off, the bone clamped firmly in her jaws.

The ginger kit stared after her for a heartbeat, then scampered, wailing, to his mother, who lay on a rock beside the cave wall. Instead of comforting him, his mother snapped something, angrily flicking her tail.

The old white she-cat was too far away to hear what the mother cat said, but she sighed.

Every cat is coming to the end of what they can bear, she thought.

She watched as the gray-and-white elder padded across the cave and dropped the eagle bone in front of an even older she-cat, who was crouching in a sleeping hollow with her nose resting on her front paws. Her dull gaze was fixed on the far wall of the cave.

“Here, Misty Water.” The gray-and-white elder nudged the bone closer to her with one paw. “Eat. It’s not much, but it might help.”

Misty Water’s indifferent gaze flickered over her friend and away again. “No, thanks, Silver Frost. I have no appetite, not since Broken Feather died.” Her voice throbbed with grief. “He would have lived, if there had been enough prey for him to eat.” She sighed. “Now I’m just waiting to join him.”

“Misty Water, you can’t—”

The white she-cat was distracted from the elders’ talk as a group of cats appeared at the entrance to the cave, shaking snow off their fur. Several other cats sprang up and ran to meet them.

“Did you catch anything?” one of them called out eagerly.

“Yes, where’s your prey?” another demanded.

The leader of the newcomers shook his head sadly. “Sorry. There wasn’t enough to bring back.”

Hope melted from the cats in the cave like mist under strong sunlight. They glanced at one another, then trailed away, their heads drooping and their tails brushing the ground.

The white she-cat watched them, then turned her head as she realized that a cat was padding up to her. Though his muzzle was gray with age and his golden tabby fur thin and patchy, he walked with a confidence that showed he had once been a strong and noble cat.

“Half Moon,” he greeted the white she-cat, settling down beside her and wrapping his tail over his paws.

The white she-cat let out a faint *mrrow* of amusement. “You shouldn’t call me that, Lion’s Roar,” she protested. “I’ve been the Teller of the Pointed Stones for many seasons.”

The golden tabby tom sniffed. “I don’t care how long the others have called you Stoneteller. You’ll always be Half Moon to me.”

Half Moon made no response, except to reach out her tail and rest it on her old friend’s shoulder.

“I was born in this cave,” Lion’s Roar went on. “But my mother, Shy Fawn, told me about the time before we came here—when you lived beside a lake, sheltered beneath trees.”

Half Moon sighed faintly. “I am the only cat left who remembers the lake, and the journey we made to come here. But I have lived three times as many moons here in the mountains than I did beside the lake, and the endless rushing of the waterfall now echoes in my heart.” She paused, blinking, then asked, “Why are you telling me this now?”

Lion’s Roar hesitated before replying. “Hunger might kill us all before the sun shines again, and there’s no more room in the cave.” He stretched out one paw and brushed Half Moon’s shoulder fur. “Something must be done.”

Half Moon’s eyes stretched wide as she gazed at him. “But we can’t leave the mountains!” she protested, her voice breathless with shock. “Jay’s Wing promised; he made me the Teller of the Pointed Stones because this was our destined home.”

Lion’s Roar met her intense green gaze. “Are you sure Jay’s Wing was right?” he asked. “How could he know what was going to happen in the future?”

“He had to be right,” Half Moon murmured.

Her mind flew back to the ceremony, so many seasons before, when Jay’s Wing had made her the Teller of the Pointed Stones. She shivered as she heard his voice again, full of love for her and grief that her destiny meant they could never be together. “Others will come after you, moon upon moon. Choose them well, train them well—trust the future of your Tribe to them.”

He would never have said that if he didn’t mean for us to stay here.

Half Moon let her gaze drift over the other cats: her cats, now thin and hungry. She shook her head sadly. Lion’s Roar was right: Something had to be done if they were to survive.

Gradually she realized that the cold gray light in the cave was brightening to a warm gold, as if the sun were rising beyond the screen of falling water—but Half Moon knew that night was falling.

At her side Lion’s Roar sat calmly washing his ears, while the other cats in the cave took no notice of the deepening golden blaze.

No cat sees it but me! What can it mean?

Bathed in the brilliant light, Half Moon remembered how, when she first became Healer, Jay’s Wing had said that her ancestors would guide her in the decisions she must make—that, sometimes, she would see strange things that meant more than they first appeared. She had never been directly aware of her ancestors, but she had learned to look out for the signs.

Possible meanings rushed through Half Moon’s mind, thick as snowflakes in a blizzard. *Maybe the warm weather is going to come early. But how would that help, when there are so many of us?* Then she wondered whether the sun was really shining somewhere else, where there was warmth and prey and shelter. *But how would that help* us, *up here in the mountains?*

The sunlight grew stronger and stronger, until Half Moon could barely stand to look into the rays. She relaxed as a new idea rose in her mind.

Maybe Lion’s Roar is right, and only some of us belong here. Maybe some of us should travel toward the place where the sun rises, to make a new home in the brightest light of all. Somewhere they will be safe, and well fed, with room to nurture generations of kits.

As Half Moon basked in the warmth of sunlight on her fur, she found the certainty she needed within herself. Some of her cats would remain, a small-enough group for the mountains to sustain, and the rest of her Tribe would journey toward the rising sun, to find a new home.

But I won’t leave the cave, she thought. *I will see out the twilight of my days here, a whole lifetime away from where I was born. And then maybe . . . just maybe . . . I’ll find Jay’s Wing again.*

CHAPTER 1

Gray Wing toiled up the snow-covered slope toward a ridge that bit into the sky like a row of snaggly teeth. He set each paw down carefully, to avoid breaking through the frozen surface and sinking into the powdery drifts underneath. Light flakes were falling, dappling his dark gray pelt. He was so cold that he couldn’t feel his pads anymore, and his belly yowled with hunger.

I can’t remember the last time I felt warm or full-fed.

In the last sunny season he had still been a kit, playing with his littermate, Clear Sky, around the edge of the pool outside the cave. Now that seemed like a lifetime ago. Gray Wing only had the vaguest memories of green leaves on the stubby mountain trees, and the sunshine bathing the rocks.

Pausing to taste the air for prey, he gazed across the snowbound mountains, peak after peak stretching away into the distance. The heavy gray sky overhead promised yet more snow to come.

But the air carried no scent of his quarry, and Gray Wing plodded on. Clear Sky appeared from behind an outcrop of rock, his pale gray fur barely visible against the snow. His jaws were empty, and as he spotted Gray Wing he shook his head.

“Not a sniff of prey anywhere!” he called. “Why don’t we—”

A raucous cry from above cut off his words. A shadow flashed over Gray Wing. Looking up, he saw a hawk swoop low across the slope, its talons hooked and cruel.

As the hawk passed, Clear Sky leaped high into the air, his forepaws outstretched. His claws snagged the bird’s feathers and he fell back, dragging it from the sky. It let out another harsh cry as it landed on the snow in a flurry of beating wings.

Gray Wing charged up the slope, his paws throwing up a fine spray of snow. Reaching his brother, he planted both forepaws on one thrashing wing. The hawk glared at him with hatred in its yellow eyes, and Gray Wing had to duck to avoid its slashing talons.

Clear Sky thrust his head forward and sank his teeth into the hawk's neck. It jerked once and went limp, its gaze growing instantly dull as blood seeped from its wound and stained the snow.

Panting, Gray Wing looked at his brother. "That was a great catch!" he exclaimed, warm triumph flooding through him.

Clear Sky shook his head. "But look how scrawny it is. There's nothing in these mountains fit to eat, and won't be until the snow clears."

He crouched beside his prey, ready to take the first bite. Gray Wing settled next to him, his jaws flooding as he thought of sinking his teeth into the hawk.

But then he remembered the starving cats back in the cave, squabbling over scraps. "We should take this prey back to the others," he meowed. "They need it to give them strength for their hunting."

"We need strength too," Clear Sky mumbled, tearing away a mouthful of the hawk's flesh.

"We'll be fine." Gray Wing gave him a prod in the side. "We're the best hunters in the Tribe. Nothing escapes us when we hunt together. We can catch something else easier than the others can."

Clear Sky rolled his eyes as he swallowed the prey. "Why must you always be so unselfish?" he grumbled. "Okay, let's go."

Together the two cats dragged the hawk down the slope and over the boulders at the bottom of a narrow gully until they reached the pool where the waterfall roared. Though it wasn't heavy, the bird was awkward to manage. Its flopping wings and claws caught on every hidden rock and buried thornbush.

"We wouldn't have to do this if you'd let us eat it," Clear Sky muttered as he struggled to maneuver the hawk along the path that led behind the waterfall. "I hope the others appreciate this."

Clear Sky grumbles, Gray Wing thought, *but he knows this is the right thing to do*.

Yowls of surprise greeted the brothers when they returned to the cave. Several cats ran to meet them, gathering around to gaze at the prey.

"It's *huge*!" Turtle Tail exclaimed, her green eyes shining as she bounded up to Gray Wing. "I can't believe you brought it back for us."

Gray Wing dipped his head, feeling slightly embarrassed at her enthusiasm. "It won't feed every cat," he mewed.

Shattered Ice, a gray-and-white tom, shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. "Which cats are going out to hunt?" he asked. "They should be the first ones to eat."

Murmurs came from among the assembled cats, broken by a shrill wail: "But I'm *hungry*! Why can't I have some? I could go out and hunt."

Gray Wing recognized the voice as being his younger brother, Jagged Peak's. Their mother, Quiet Rain, padded up and gently nudged her kit back toward the sleeping hollows. "You're too young to hunt," she murmured. "And if the older cats don't eat, there'll be no prey for any cat."

"Not fair!" Jagged Peak muttered as his mother guided him away.

Meanwhile the hunters, including Shattered Ice and Turtle Tail, lined up beside the body of the hawk. Each of them took one mouthful, then stepped back for the next cat to take their turn. By the time they had finished, and filed out along the path behind the waterfall, there was very little meat left.

Clear Sky, watching beside Gray Wing, let out an irritated snort. “I still wish *we* could have eaten it.”

Privately Gray Wing agreed with him, but he knew there was no point in complaining. *There isn’t enough food. Every cat is weak, hungry—just clinging on until the sun comes back*.

The pattering of paws sounded behind him; he glanced around to see Bright Stream trotting over to Clear Sky. “Is it true that you caught that huge hawk all by yourself?”

Clear Sky hesitated, basking in the pretty tabby she-cat’s admiration. Gray Wing gave a meaningful purr.

“No,” Clear Sky admitted. “Gray Wing helped.”

Bright Stream gave Gray Wing a nod, but her gaze immediately returned to Clear Sky. Gray Wing took a couple of paces back and left them alone.

“They look good together.” A voice spoke at his shoulder; Gray Wing turned to see the elder Silver Frost standing beside him. “There’ll be kits come the warmest moon.”

Gray Wing nodded. Any cat with half an eye could see how friendly his brother and Bright Stream had become as they stood with their heads together murmuring to each other.

“More than one litter, maybe,” Silver Frost went on, giving Gray Wing a nudge. “That Turtle Tail is certainly a beautiful cat.”

Hot embarrassment flooded through Gray Wing from ears to tail-tip. He had no idea what to say, and was grateful when he saw Stoneteller approaching them. She took a winding path among her cats, pausing to talk to each one. Though Stoneteller’s paws were unsteady because of her great age, Gray Wing could see the depth of experience in her green gaze and the care she felt for every one of her Tribe.

“There’s still a bit of the hawk left,” Gray Wing heard her murmur to Snow Hare, who was stretched out in one of the sleeping hollows, washing her belly. “You should eat something.”

Snow Hare paused in her tongue-strokes. “I’m leaving the food for the young ones,” she replied. “They need their strength for hunting.”

Stoneteller bent her head and touched the elder’s ear with her nose. “You have earned your food many times over.”

“Perhaps the mountains have fed us for long enough.” It was Lion’s Roar who had spoken from where he sat, a tail-length away.

Stoneteller gave him a swift glance, full of meaning.

What’s that all about? Gray Wing asked himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by Quiet Rain, who came to sit beside him. “Have you eaten anything?” she asked.

All we ever talk about is food. *Or the lack of it.* Trying to curb his impatience, Gray Wing replied, “I’ll have something before I go out again.”

To his relief, his mother didn’t insist. “You did very well to catch that hawk,” she meowed.

“It wasn’t only me,” Gray Wing told her. “Clear Sky made this amazing leap to bring it down.”

“You *both* did well,” Quiet Rain purred. She turned to look at her young kits, who were scuffling together close by. “I hope that Jagged Peak and Fluttering Bird will be just as skillful when they’re old enough to hunt.”

At that moment, Jagged Peak swiped his sister’s paws out from underneath her. Fluttering Bird let out a wail as she fell over, hitting her head on a rock. Instead of getting up again, she lay still, whimpering.

“You’re such a silly kit!” Jagged Peak exclaimed.

As Quiet Rain padded over to give her daughter a comforting lick, Gray Wing noticed how small and fragile Fluttering Bird looked. Her head seemed too big for her body, and when she scrambled to her paws again her legs wobbled. Jagged Peak, on the other hand, was strong and well muscled, his gray tabby fur thick and healthy.

While Quiet Rain took care of his sister, Jagged Peak scampered to Gray Wing. “Tell me about the hawk,” he demanded. “How did you catch it? I bet I could catch one if I was allowed out of this stupid cave!”

Gray Wing purred excitedly. “You should have seen Clear Sky’s leap—”

A loud yowl cut off Gray Wing’s story. “Let all cats be silent! Stoneteller will speak!”

The cat who had made the announcement was Shaded Moss, a black-and-white tom who was one of the strongest and most respected cats of the Tribe. He stood on a boulder at the far end of the cavern, with Stoneteller beside him. The old cat looked even more fragile next to his powerful figure.

As he wriggled his way toward the front of the crowd gathered around the boulder, Gray Wing heard murmurs of curiosity from the others.

“Maybe Stoneteller is going to appoint Shaded Moss as her replacement,” Silver Frost suggested.

“It’s time she appointed some cat,” Snow Hare agreed. “It’s what we’ve all been expecting for moons.”

Gray Wing found himself a place to sit next to Clear Sky and Bright Stream, and looked up at Stoneteller and Shaded Moss. Stoneteller rose to her paws and let her gaze travel over her Tribe until the murmuring died away into silence.

“I am grateful to all of you for working so hard to survive here,” she began, her voice so faint that it could scarcely be heard above the sound of the waterfall. “I am proud to be your Healer, but I have to accept that there are things even I cannot put right. Lack of space and lack of food are beyond my control.”

“It’s not your fault!” Silver Frost called out. “Don’t give up!”

Stoneteller dipped her head in acknowledgment of the elder’s support. “Our home cannot support us all,” she continued. “But there is another place for some of us, full of sunlight and warmth and prey for all seasons. I have seen it . . . in my dreams.”

Utter silence greeted her announcement. Gray Wing couldn’t make sense of what the Healer had just said. *Dreams? What’s the point of that? I dreamed I killed a huge eagle and ate it all myself, but I was still hungry when I woke up!*

He noticed that Lion’s Roar sat bolt upright as Stoneteller spoke, and was staring at her, his eyes wide with astonishment.

“I believe in my heart that the other place is waiting for those of you who are brave enough to make the journey,” Stoneteller went on. “Shaded Moss will lead you there, with my blessing.”

The old white cat glanced once more around her Tribe, her gaze full of sadness and pain. Then she slid down from the top of the boulder and vanished into the tunnel at the back of the cave, which led to her own den.

A flood of shocked speculation passed through the rest of the cats. After a couple of heartbeats, Shaded Moss stepped forward and raised his tail for silence.

“This has been my home all my life,” he began when he could make himself heard. His voice was solemn. “I always expected to die here. But if Stoneteller believes that some of us must leave to find the place of her dream, then I will go, and do my best to keep you safe.”

Dappled Pelt sprang to her paws, her golden eyes shining. “I’ll go!”

“So will I!” Tall Shadow added, her sleek black figure tense with excitement.

“Are you flea-brained?” Twisted Branch, a scraggy brown tom, stared incredulously at the two she-cats. “Wandering off with no idea where you’re heading?”

Gray Wing remained silent, but he couldn't help agreeing with Twisted Branch. The mountains were his home: He knew every rock, every bush, every trickling stream. *It would tear my heart in two if I had to leave just because Stoneteller had a dream.*

Turning to Clear Sky, he was amazed to see excitement gleaming in his brother's eyes. "You're not seriously considering this?" he asked.

"Why not?" Clear Sky demanded in return. "This could be the answer to all our problems. What's the point of struggling to feed every mouth if there's an alternative?" His whiskers quivered eagerly. "It will be an adventure!" He called out to Shaded Moss: "I'll go!" Glancing at Bright Stream, he added, "You'll come too, won't you?"

Bright Stream leaned closer to Clear Sky. "I don't know . . . would you really go without me?"

Before Clear Sky could reply, little Jagged Peak wormed his way forward between his two older brothers, followed by Fluttering Bird. "I want to go!" he announced loudly.

Fluttering Bird nodded enthusiastically. "Me too!" she squeaked.

Quiet Rain followed them, and drew both kits closer to her with a sweep of her tail. "Certainly not!" she meowed. "You two are staying right here."

"You could come with us," Jagged Peak suggested.

His mother shook her head. "This is my home," she said. "We've survived before. When the warm season returns, we'll have enough to eat."

Gray Wing dipped his head in agreement. *How can they forget what Quiet Rain told me when I was a kit? This place was promised to us by a cat who led us here from a faraway lake. How can we think of leaving?*

Shaded Moss's powerful voice rose up again over the clamor. "No cat needs to decide yet," he announced. "Give some thought to what you want to do. The half-moon is just past; I will leave at the next full-moon along with any—"

He broke off, his gaze fixed on the far end of the cave. Turning his head, Gray Wing saw the hunting party making their way inside. Their pelts were clotted with snow and their heads drooped.

Not one was carrying prey.

“We’re sorry,” Shattered Ice called out. “The snow is heavier than ever, and there wasn’t a single—”

“We’re leaving!” some cat yowled from the crowd around Shaded Moss.

The hunting party stood still for a moment, glancing at one another in confusion and dismay. Then they pelted down the length of the cavern to listen as their Tribemates explained what Stoneteller had told them, and what Shaded Moss intended to do.

Turtle Tail made her way to where Gray Wing was sitting and plopped down beside him, beginning to clean the melting snow from her pelt. “Isn’t this great?” she asked between licks. “A warm place, where there’s plenty of prey, just waiting for us? Are you going, Gray Wing?”

“I am,” Clear Sky responded, before Gray Wing could answer. “And so is Bright Stream.” The young she-cat gave him an uncertain look, but Clear Sky didn’t notice. “It’ll be a hard journey, but I think it’ll be worth it.”

“It’ll be *wonderful*!” Turtle Tail blinked happily. “Come on, Gray Wing! How about it?”

Gray Wing couldn’t give her the answer she wanted. As he looked around the cave at the cats he had known all his life, he couldn’t imagine abandoning them for a place that might only exist in Stoneteller’s dreams.

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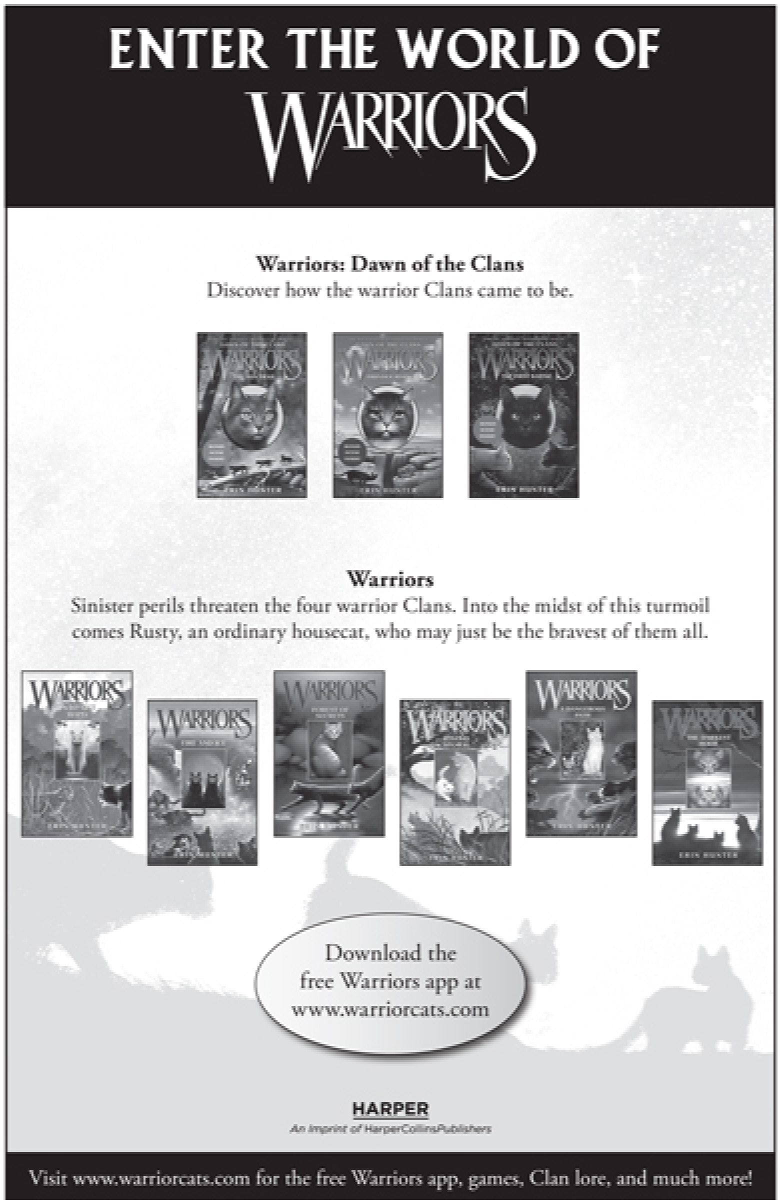

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WARRIORS

Warriors: Dawn of the Clans
Discover how the warrior Clans came to be.

Warriors
Sinister perils threaten the four warrior Clans. Into the midst of this turmoil comes Rusty, an ordinary housecat, who may just be the bravest of them all.

Download the
free Warriors app at
www.warriorcats.com

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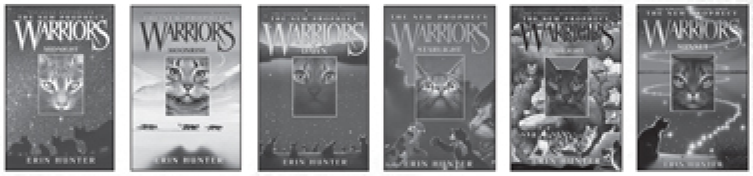
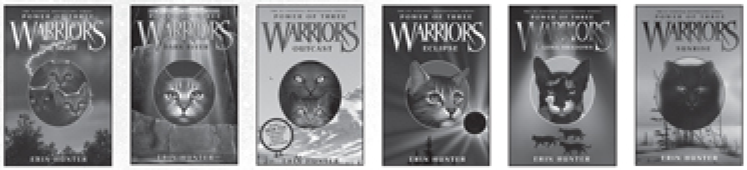
Warriors: The New Prophecy
Follow the next generation of heroic cats as they set off
on a quest to save the Clans from destruction.



Warriors: Power of Three
Firestar's grandchildren begin their training as warrior cats.
Prophecy foretells that they will hold more power than any cats before them.



Warriors: Omen of the Stars
Which ThunderClan apprentice will complete the prophecy that
foretells that three Clanmates hold the future of the Clans in their paws?

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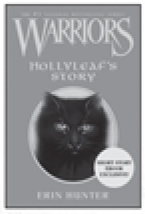
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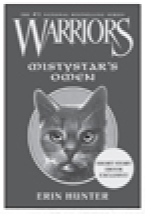
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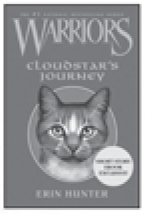
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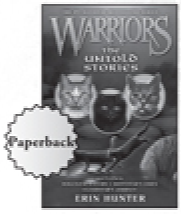
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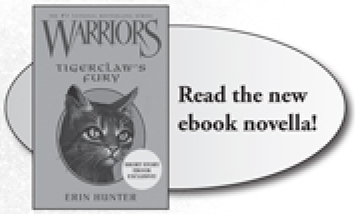
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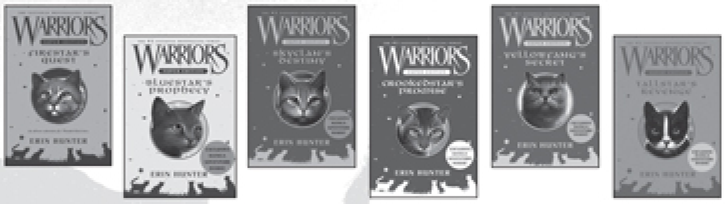
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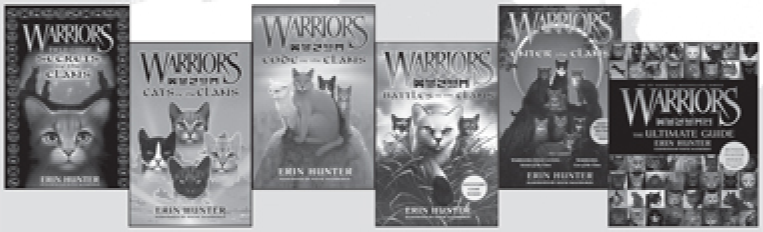
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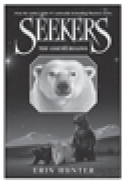
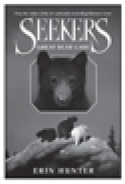

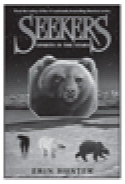

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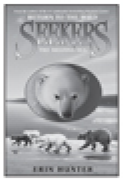
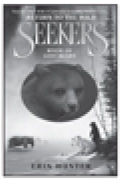
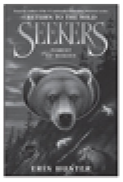

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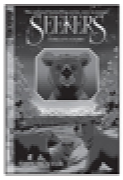

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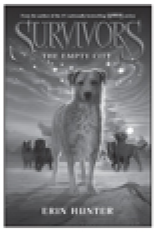
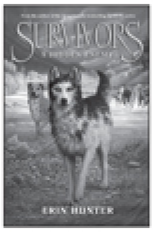
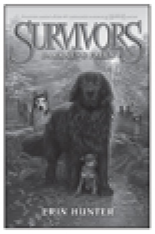
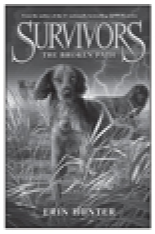
The time has come for dogs to rule the wild.

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About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Survivors and Seekers series.

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